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1944

PLANET STORIES

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STRANGE ADVENTURES
ON OTHER WORLDS
—THE UNIVERSE OF
FUTURE CENTURIES

KEEPER OF THE
DEATHLESS SLEEP

by ALBERT DE PINA



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Cover design by Parkhurst

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MIND STEALERS OF PLUTO

By JOSEPH FARRELL

Ron Barnard had stuck his nose into one news story too many. It had started with a lovely girl, a wily Chinese and a drug ring that circled the System. Now it was ending for him in a rogue spaceship—his epitaph a rocket's red stream across the starways.

Illustration by DOOLIN



RON BARNARD leaned unhappily on Quong Kee's bar and looked over the worst dive on Mars. This hell hole of Quong Kee's was no fit place even for a newspaperman looking for a story on the dope ring that was haunting the outer planets. The habitués were cut-throats, fugitives from Earth and the space police. To say nothing of the *neoin* fiends.

The two unshaven men hunched at a corner table, for instance. He eyed them in contempt. They were far gone in their

addiction to the drug, and he would put no crime past them. They probably would murder their grandmothers for a gram of *neoin*.

The two persons in question straightened as if a gun had been fired. They faced the bar, and their questing eyes found Barnard. One of them, teeth bared and hands bent into claws, started to move toward the reporter.

"What did you think?" the man demanded.



Barnard's dull eyes swung to the steady weapon.

Barnard dropped a coin on the bar and tried to walk carelessly to the door. He wanted no fights with a *neoin*-filled madman. Silently he cursed himself for forgetting the extra sensory powers imparted by the drug. But the men had seemed too far gone to use their ESP.

The man charged across the room. Barnard saw that escape was out and resigned himself to a fight. He waited for the wild lunge, sidestepped and shot in a right that sent the addict reeling back. A few customers watched with mild interest. But this was routine at Quong Kee's—nobody would interfere.

Sullenly, the man glared at him, as if gathering courage for another charge. Barnard knew that actually the irresponsible creature was working himself up to a murderous pitch. Now he felt the waves of fury beating at his mind.

He waited, tense and ready. From the corner of his vision he saw the drapes that cut off the back room come apart, and a figure hurrying out. A slender figure in faded coveralls. Then he looked again.

It was a woman—a slender pale girl who clicked somehow in his memory. He had seen her around Kainor, this port city of Mars, several times in the past few days.

Watching her, he almost missed the onslaught of the *neoin* fiend. The fury of the charge backed him to the wall and he lashed out desperately against the claws and knees of the man. His head jammed against the wall and crimson streaks exploded before him. He jabbed with aching arms, trying to push the madman off. Dimly, he saw the girl trying to whisper something in the fiend's ear.

The man broke off clawing suddenly, a look of surprise on his twisted face. Barnard watched weakly as he backed off a few steps to listen to what the girl was whispering. Then the man glared with sullen respect at Barnard for a few seconds and went back to his friend.

The girl turned swiftly and started back for the drapes. Barnard caught her arm.

"Miss—" He stared at her. It was his first good look, and he wondered where she had found the courage to interfere with a raging *neoin* fiend. If that man had turned on her—!

She wasn't beautiful—she looked as if she hadn't slept much lately. If some-

body could put a few pounds on her in the right places—and a smile on her face—

"Thanks," he said, puffing. "I was in a spot—you can't hurt those lads when they're hopped. What did you tell him, anyway?"

She shrank back a little. Strangely, he felt that the fear in her eyes was more of him than of the cutthroats in Quong Kee's. Her face acquired a faint touch of color.

"I told him," she said, "that I'd take away his *neoin* ration card."

She pulled loose and disappeared into the other room.

BARNARD stared at the drapes and grinned a little at the evasive answer. What had she told the fiend? If he knew, it might help him to get some news. And what was she doing here in this dive—he'd swear she wasn't the type!

He thought of the boss back on Earth thundering through the news room as Barnard's meager despatches dribbled through. But Hell! He'd done all any human could possibly do! He'd spoken with officials and spacemen and scientists, poked his skinny nose into dens like this where a man risked his life if he so much as *thought* out of line. He'd even bought some of the drug from the peddlers who operated almost openly, and he'd cultivated them, but they were only tools.

The higher-ups might have been invisible for all anybody knew about them. Nobody even knew where the drug came from. But wherever it originated, it was swiftly corrupting Mars and Venus, as well as the Jovian system and the asteroid belt.

When small quantities appeared on Earth, the powers-that-be of the System News Service smelled news. Ron Barnard, star reporter who had unveiled many a scandal in gay twenty-third century New York, was sent to investigate. And Ron Barnard stood in Mars' wildest dive, scratching his head and staring after a frightened, pretty girl.

"That's my sister," said a childish voice beside him.

Barnard stared at the big man beside him. The man was a splendid physical specimen, but his face—

It was the face of a mindless idiot.

Barnard felt repelled. The man's features were not idiotic; they should have

been those of an intelligent person. But the eyes changed everything. They were blank and somehow—soulless. Barnard shrank automatically away from the apelike creature.

Then he understood what the idiot had said.

"Your sister!" He stared unbelievably.

The gray haired shambling being gurgled, childlike. "My sister—Gail."

Barnard felt a curious shame in finding a human being in such a state, talking like a baby. But maybe he could learn something. He dug into his pocket, thrust a coin into the idiot's palm.

"What does your sister do? Does she maybe sell little packages of gray powder to people?"

The creature looked naively at him. "Gail don't like the gray powder. She says I must never eat the gray powder. Do you want some? Lots of mans here sells some."

Barnard thought. He had seen that girl before. A hunch began to grow in him.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"George Melvin," the idiot said.

"George!"

It was Gail Melvin's voice. Barnard saw her in the doorway of Quong Kee's back room. George went dutifully to her, clutching the coin Barnard had handed him. The girl took his hand and pulled him inside.

Barnard regarded the doorway sourly. He looked around Quong Kee's, caught the glance of the maniac who had attacked him. He took his coat and airpac and left hastily.

AT THE communications center he sent another despatch. Nothing much to report, and he knew the boss wouldn't like it. The System News Service firmly believed that scoops grew on Martian trees and Ron Barnard was expected to pick out a nice one to feed the hungry public.

Jingling the change in his pocket, he sensed something wrong, and pulled out the coins for a look. His lucky coin was missing—a rare twentieth century Buffalo nickel. He had given it to the half wit.

He fingered the bruises the *neoin* fiend had made on his face and grinned humorlessly. The coin hadn't brought him much luck.

He was going into his hotel when he sighted George Melvin shambling down

the street. He paused, waiting for the half-wit to reach him. It was cold, and he wanted to get inside, but leads were scarce. He fell into step beside George.

"Hello, George," he said. "Where do you and Gail live?"

The half wit looked innocently at him. His airpac was strapped around the collar of his coat. Evidently Gail did not consider him intelligent enough even to breathe properly on Mars! Barnard squeezed his own airpac in an automatic motion. Oxygen on Mars was just short of enough for humans. A man would sooner be minus his pants than his airpac, though Martian-born humans needed them only at time of exertion.

"We live in Chicago."

"Yes—that's on Earth. But where do you stay on Mars?"

"In Chicago on Mars, too."

Barnard looked suspiciously at him. But the vacuous expression certainly was not feigned; George Melvin's eyes were less intelligent than a fish's.

"Do you stay at Quong Kee's?" the reporter tried.

"Sometimes. At night we go back to Chicago. Where do you stay?"

"In the fog, most of the time." Barnard tried another line. "Where's Gail now?"

"In jail." George Melvin said it without changing his tone or his expression.

Barnard siezed his coat front and stared into the dull eyes. "In jail? George, what happened? Who arrested her? Why?"

"A man came. A man with a star on his hat—"

"The Space Police!"

Barnard released the half-wit. He stared happily toward the gray building of the Space Police. This was something—he felt the hunch too strongly to have any doubt. The story was going to break!

The Space Police were relatively new, and it behooved them to be good to the press, for there was still much opposition to their existence. He hesitated a moment, thinking of the lack of enthusiasm with which Commander John Lansfer had received him. But Lansfer would let him in on the story, or there'd be some hot articles in the newspapers of the System News Service.

He pushed another coin into George

Melvin's paw. "George, go back to Quong Kee's and wait until I come. Do you understand? I'm going to find out about Gail."

Watching the half-wit disappear, he felt a pang where his conscience should have been. Somehow he didn't like the idea of Gail Melvin as a part of this *neoin* ring.

"Hell," he growled to himself. "I can't afford to be human. I have a job to do—and the System News Service comes first."

He pushed into a thin cold Martian wind and hurried toward the warmth of the police building.

II

BARNARD looked through narrowed eyes at Commander Lansfer of the Space Police, and he knew the man was lying. All his newsman's instinct told him that the dark-haired, sharp-featured police officer knew more than he was telling. He leaned across the desk.

"Commander, I came all the way from Earth to get the inside on this dope ring. Who's behind it? Where does it come from?"

Lansfer shrugged slightly. His face was expressionless, as always. "We are working on the problem," he said.

Barnard made a disgusted gesture. "We know that the outer planets are being flooded with *neoin*. Mars is full of human wrecks, and half the asterites are using the stuff. If it ever gets loose on Earth, the human race will have a worse enemy than the black plague."

"We will cooperate with the press," said Lansfer, "as far as it's practical to do so. In the meantime, you may be sure we're not sleeping."

"I hope not." Barnard glared at the policeman and made a mental note to pan the Space Police in his next despatch. "And how does Gail Melvin fit in?"

"Gail Melvin is a minor peddler. We've nothing on her—just took her in for questioning, to be sure she knew nothing important." A trace of annoyance shaded his eyes for a moment. "But we took her in quietly. How did you find out about it?"

"From my special secret service," said Barnard dryly.

"Then," said Lansfer, "your secret service can tell you the rest of the story. If you're quite through—"

They stood and for a second faced each other across the desk. Lansfer, six hard feet of spaceman, hard jawed and poker faced. Barnard, six lean flexible feet of newsman, crowding his thermostats. Then Barnard whirled and went out.

Standing before the building, he reflected. No news meant the boss would be sending more spacegrams threatening to fire him—and meaning it. His hunch was still solid on Lansfer's knowing something. There was something behind the secrecy with which the space police worked, but—

There was more than one way to find out. If Lansfer wouldn't talk, other policemen might. He looked around, found the nearest saloon. Some of the space police had just finished their day's work. Thoughtfully jingling the platinum coins in his pocket, he went into the saloon.

Alone at one end of the bar was a patrolman. Barnard took a place beside him and ordered a drink.

"H'lo, Remish," he said. "What's the news on Gail Melvin?"

Remish grinned and shook his head. Barnard felt a slight distaste for what he was about to do. It didn't seem right.

He took a balled fist from his pocket and opened it slowly, holding it between himself and the patrolman so that it was not visible to anybody else in the room. He opened it just enough for Remish to see the five Martian platins.

Remish turned and faced the row of bottles behind the bar. His face was blank. For a long minute he said nothing. Then: "I don't like that, Barnard. I could use that as well as anybody. But there's something I like better."

Barnard hadn't liked it either. But hell—after some of the police he'd met on the outer planets, he couldn't help but be cynical. He raised his glass and threw down the drink.

"It's everyday stuff, of course," Remish conceded. "But I'm going to be one cop who's different. There's talk enough now about the Space Patrol—that we're fronting for pirates and transporting *neoin*. And some funny things have been going on."

He fingered his glass thoughtfully. "Nothing I can put a definite finger on," he mused. "But maybe you're the man who can do it. With the System News Service behind you—"

"I don't know much," he went on. "But I'll play along with you—and I hope I'm doing the right thing. Gail Melvin—the chief had her under a Sokolsky lie detector. Greatest thing in lie detectors yet. She was clear—has no connection with the dope ring."

Barnard caught his breath. Gail Melvin had no connection with the *neoin* gang? But Lansfer had said she was a minor peddler?

The patrolman stared into his glass of *boorsha* for a moment, hesitating. He turned again to Barnard. "Another thing. That George Melvin is faking. He's no more of a half-wit than I am—I hope. When I last saw him, he was on Venus running the swankiest gin mill in Lidice. He and his partner—Quong Kee!"

Barnard stared incredulously at the patrolman. "George Melvin faking! Not a chance—he's just what he seems to be, and I wouldn't bet any more on a royal flush!"

"I know," Remish shrugged. "And do you want to know something else? I haven't been able to find a person who's seen Quong Kee since he came to Mars!"

Barnard slowly put down his drink and left the saloon.

HE SAILED into Quong Kee's, paused cautiously to see that the fiend who had attacked him was sleeping with his head on the table, and plunged through the drapes into the back room. There was an answer to this and he was bound he'd find it.

A gray, tired Chinese looked up from behind a desk. His right hand had darted to the edge of the desk when Barnard entered. Thoughtfully, he studied the reporter and folded his hands.

Barnard faced him. "Quong Kee. You and George Barnard were partners at one time."

Quong Kee gazed back coolly, and Barnard saw that he'd learn only what the man decided he should know. After a while Quong Kee nodded.

"Yes—Mr. Barnard. George Melvin was—and is—my partner."

"How did you know me?" Barnard demanded. "You never leave this room."

A tired smile flickered over the thin lips. "Earlier this evening I watched Miss Melvin extricate you from a difficult position. Until she informed me that you were seeking news, I never realized that journalism involved such jeopardy."

Barnard grinned involuntarily. He was beginning to like this Oriental who spoke in cultured tones. Since he realized that threats or bribes would do no good, he gave in to the impulsive liking.

"Mind telling me something about Gail Melvin?" he asked. "And about things in general?"

Quong Kee peered narrowly at Barnard through half-closed eyes. The reporter wondered uncomfortably if the man used *neoin* and was studying him with extra sensory faculties, but he swiftly rejected the thought. There was no trace of the drug in Quong Kee's appearance. Maybe it was natural ESP—or just an old-fashioned sizing-up.

"You are very anxious to secure this—scoop, aren't you, Mr. Barnard?"

Barnard thrust his face closer. "Quong Kee," he said slowly, "I would give my right arm to break this story. I would cut every throat on Mars if it would help me to find out where *neoin* comes from."

He meant it—almost, anyway. Somehow the thought of cutting Gail Melvin's throat persisted. He forced the thought back. No price was too high!

"I, too, would give much to destroy the drug traffic," Quong Kee said softly. "George Melvin and I operated an establishment in Lidice, Venus—until *neoin* appeared. We were doing excellently. But then George became involved in a crusade against the drug peddlers. He found out some things—I do not know exactly what.

"But he disappeared. And things began to happen to our establishment. Things like bombs, bullets, poison in the food—I was forced to close and barely escaped with my life."

He picked up the mounted photograph that Barnard had vaguely noticed on the desk and turned it for the reporter to see. Barnard recognized Quong Kee and

—George Melvin! But a George Melvin whose eyes were young and intelligent and flashing with the joy of living!

"Gail located him," said Quong Kee, "through the Missing Persons Division. He was here in Kainor, in the condition in which you saw him tonight. Gail and I packed what we could into George's space ship, the *Chicago*, and we came here, where I opened this—ah—place of refreshment."

"*Chicago*," Barnard mused. "I should have guessed that."

"Gail recognized you standing out there this evening," said Quong Kee. Again the haunted smile crept over his lips. "I can't understand her motivation for intervening in your quarrel. She told me you were a great reporter who might expose the criminals and she had to save you."

"Isn't that reason enough?" Barnard demanded suspiciously. "What did she say to him?"

"She told him you were a higher-up in the *neoin* organization and would see that his supply was stopped if he harmed you. A clever girl—but foolish."

Barnard didn't ask why. "Where is George Melvin now?" he demanded.

Before Quong Kee could answer, the pound of heavy feet sounded in the doorway. Barnard whirled and watched the three local policemen march in.

"Where's the body?" asked the leader.

Quong Kee's eyes flickered briefly toward Barnard, and he gestured toward something the newsman hadn't noticed. In a corner of the room was a bed. With something on it. The policeman yanked a sheet off the something. Barnard felt the hairs on the back of his neck beginning to rise.

He stared at the body of George Melvin.

"**I** HAD my men detain everybody," Quong Kee told the police. "But the body was discovered close to the door, indicating that the murderer escaped. Several fights were in progress at the time, and it is possible that he was struck by a stray knife, but I doubt it."

"No," the policeman grunted. "The knife struck upwards and his pockets have been searched."

"Evidently he was enticed into the hallway for that purpose," said Quong Kee.

Barnard frowned, watching the police examine the knife that protruded from George Melvin's chest. Then the dope ring, fearing that he would divulge something, had finished him off.

But that didn't make sense. They had seemed pleased to let him run loose before, probably as an example—why the sudden fear of his talking? He thought suddenly of the new lie detector mentioned by Remish, and wondered if that instrument could reach even into the mind that George Melvin did not have.

He stayed close to the police as they made a brief examination, asking a few questions and then closing up their notebooks and leaving. It was clear that they didn't expect to solve the murder. To them it was routine—another derelict knifed by a *neoin* fiend.

The whole thing made Barnard a little sick. He gazed uncomfortably at the corpse. The man had hardly known that he lived, yet—

His lucky nickel hadn't brought much luck lately. It seemed to have turned into a Jonah.

He said nothing until the police had departed and the body had been removed. When he and Quong Kee were alone, he asked:

"Does Gail know this yet?"

"No."

"She's the only lead now." A thought made him uncomfortable. "Quong Kee—do you think she's in danger?"

The Chinese shrugged. He looked suddenly ancient, tired. His weary eyes met Barnard's.

"Since I've been on Mars, I've never left this room. Call it cowardice or intelligence, but I dare not expose myself. They haven't molested me here—my current clientele wouldn't be disturbed by a few bombs, anyway. And here I am protected—you narrowly escaped death when you entered this room."

He ran his hand along the side of his desk. "I could fill this room with the deadliest rays known to military science. I mention this by way of reminding you that you are not in a friendly game. You stand an excellent chance of being killed, or of losing your mind."

That shocked Barnard for about one second. But he had no time to be both-

ered with danger. And the System News Service was all-important.

"I'll take the chance," he said grimly. "Where's Gail?"

Quong Kee's haunted eyes closed momentarily. "She is on the *Chicago*. She needs somebody now, Ron Barnard. Go to her. I can't help; I'm an old man and afraid for my life. You are young and strong. There is danger, but go to her. Even if only for your scoop."

Something in the old man's voice was hypnotic. Barnard stared at him. "Where is this *Chicago*?" he asked.

"It's at Main Spaceport, in the public field. If she is not there, use this key and wait for her."

Barnard rose slowly. He tried to shake a lump out of his throat, cursing himself for going soft. Sitting here listening to an old man mouth sentiment—he shook his head angrily and glared at Quong Kee.

"I'll go," he said. "But *only* for the scoop."

III

QUONG KEE'S faintly cynical smile didn't make him feel any better. Leaving the place, he glared belligerently at the maniac he had fought with. Marching to the spaceport, his feelings intensified so that he forgot to walk slowly, the first rule on Mars, and had to hold his airpac to his nostrils all the way. By the time he found the *Chicago*, his fingers were stiff from holding the instrument.

"Damn that living relic of a Quong Kee," he muttered, changing hands. "Damn everything!"

So the girl needed him. He growled at the idea of the Chinese putting the girl ahead of the System News Service.

His sense of humor came through then, and he laughed at himself. Ron Barnard, the hardest hearted reporter in the Solar System, was developing a crush on a girl he hardly knew! He chuckled at his emotions as if they were somebody else's.

"If the boys in the city room ever hear of this," he thought, "they'll laugh me right off Earth. I'll have to become a space-beacon keeper."

He stood for a minute sizing up the *Chicago*. Odd, he reflected, how the human mind before space travel had pictured

space craft as wingless and cigar shaped. This rugged model, of an almost forgotten vintage, was short and stubby and wide winged. It scarcely looked spaceworthy, but the skies were filled with old craft like this one.

He used the key Quong Kee had given him and found the ship deserted. The interior was better. He was pleased to find a three-inch layer of Selene between the hulls. The artificial spider silk, closely woven and specially processed, was as tough as any material in existence and it's insulating qualities couldn't be matched.

In the spotless control cabin he found that the instruments were fully modern. The cabin was globular; gyroscopes kept the gravity—if any—under its floor. A glance into other compartments brought a whistle to his lips—the *Chicago* was crammed with fuel and food. Gail Melvin must have prepared this as a permanent home.

Two tiny sections were the sleeping quarters of Gail and George Melvin. He poked around them until a feeling of guilt made him stop. He sank into a spongy, bolted-down chair, damning his new-found ethics. He'd straighten out a few things when that female showed up.

SHE DIDN'T seem surprised to see him. She glanced his way casually and started tugging off her heavy coat. A gentlemanly impulse almost had him out of his seat to help her, but he stifled it.

Her nose was red from the mild summer weather of Mars, and he thought briefly that if her cheeks were a little fuller, she would probably be more or less good looking. As a matter of plain fact, she was too damned skinny. She must spend most of her time worrying about her brother.

She was taller than he had thought, but still looked slight and helpless. And hopeless as well. Her shoulders drooped a little as she faced him.

"I saw Quong Kee," she said.

"Oh—I'm sorry about your brother." He hesitated. "Have you any idea who did it?"

He almost squirmed when she looked at him. The expression in her eyes was not entirely friendly.

"I have ideas," she said. "And they're not nice."

Her eyes were dark and smoldering now.

"They questioned George with a new type of lie detector—Skolssolky or some such name. I wasn't supposed to know—"

Barnard's eyebrows went up. "The police questioned George? Somebody must have found out!"

Gail dropped her coat over the back of another chair and sat on the chair. She was pale and her eyes were haggard.

"When I found the police had picked him up," she said, "I took an *espine* pill and became *en rapport* with him."

She pressed her slender fingers against her temples. "I'm tired . . . *espine* isn't as bad as *neoin*, of course, but it has a strong reaction. They found out some things from George that I'd never been able to find out.

"This instrument reaches deeper into the subconscious than anything ever used before. Even so, everything was vague. But George had been on Pluto. Somehow he'd followed the *neoin* trail there; how, I don't know.

"But on Pluto, they did something to him. They took his mind and made him like a new-born child. His brain was perfectly blank. I've been teaching him as I'd teach an infant—but he was so slow learning."

"Pluto—" Barnard stared. "Then *neoin* comes from Pluto. Lansfer knows this—"

He looked at the girl and damned his conscience again. There was a first aid box set into the wall, and he found a bottle of brandy in it. A small black bottle was there. He noted the label—*Espine*, another outlawed drug the authorities tolerated for emergency purposes. Not habit-forming, but continued use of it would soften the brain and wreck the nerve centers.

He slammed the cabinet door on the black bottle. She had reason to be tired.

He made her drink the brandy. She spoke softly, between sips. "When I heard that, I determined to go to Pluto. If something there could take my brother's intelligence away, we might be able to reverse the process."

"Or lose your own," Barnard murmured.

"When Quong Kee told me about the—George, it changed all that, of course. There was no need to go to Pluto."

"You've got your nerve," Barnard growled. "You speak very calmly about invading Pluto single handed."

Definitely, Pluto was no place for her. But he had to be in on the kill. Would Lansfer cooperate?

"Miss Melvin," he said, "I'll have to see the Space Police, find out if they'll take me with them. I suspect they won't. So I'm going to cable my boss for money, and if it's all right with you, I'll charter this ship—"

"I'll be very happy," she said, "to take you with me to Pluto—so you can get your story."

He stared. "But—you mean you still intend to go to Pluto? What possible reason could you have now?"

SHE REACHED for her coat and dug into the sleeve. Barnard blinked when three of her fingers came out at the shoulder.

"That hole," she said, "was made by a bullet. Somebody took a shot at me on the way over here, and I've been followed. Evidently they've decided I know too much. I'll never step out that door alive."

She indicated a red pane of glass on the instrument panel. "If that glows, they're approaching the ship. Be ready to give them a warning blast from the rockets."

Barnard thought wistfully of the gun he had left in his hotel room. "That means I'm here for keeps, too. But you can't go to Pluto. I'll drop you off at another Martian city—or on some other planet that's on our route."

"Did you ever operate a space ship?" she asked.

"No, but—"

She shook her head. "Besides, they have agents everywhere. My life isn't worth a counterfeit milliplatin. So I might just as well go to Pluto."

Barnard sprang to life as the detector signal glowed deep red. He leaped to the handles of the rocket jets, prepared to throw out a warning blast.

There was a pounding on the hull. "Open up, in there! It's the Space Police!"

"That's Lansfer's voice." Barnard hesitated at the lock. "That means we're safe—or does it? Is this ship ready to take off?"

"Yes—"

"Then—just on a hunch—get at the control board—"

He closed the inner door of the lock behind him before he opened the outer. No use silhouetting himself against the lighted interior.

Lansfer almost lost his poker face. "You! You'll get into trouble, Barnard, if you're not careful. What are you doing here?"

"Guest of Miss Melvin, commander. And you?"

The officer indicated a paper. Barnard noted that his other hand remained close to his holster.

"We're impounding this ship. The Space Police can't be responsible for old wrecks endangering human life and limb on the spaceways."

"Very thoughtful of the Space Police all of a sudden," said Barnard.

There were two other patrolmen with Lansfer, he saw. Remish and a red-haired man he knew to be named Grady. His searching eyes picked out several shadowy figures lurking at corners of the field. He looked again at Lansfer.

"You have our word," he said, "that this ship is to be used only as living quarters by Miss Melvin."

Lansfer stared coolly up at him. "This court order calls for the *Chicago* to be delivered immediately into the custody of the sheriff and auctioned for scrap. You and Miss Melvin will leave it immediately."

Barnard nodded agreeably. "All right, commander. We'll leave—right now."

Lansfer relaxed. He was about two feet below Barnard, the platform being that high from the ground. Barnard reached out carefully with his foot and shoved. The spaceman flew backwards into Grady, and the two of them crashed to the frozen ground.

Barnard pulled the door swiftly. Lansfer was clawing for his gun and shouting for Remish to stop them. Remish's gloved fingers fumbled as he drew and the outer door was closed before he fired. Barnard grinned as the bullets bounced off the door. That hull was more than tough enough to

handle all the bullets the Space Police could throw at it.

"Get off the ground, Gail," he shouted.

He slammed the inner door of the lock and swayed with the control room globe as the rockets went into action. The ship jumped forward a few feet, balked for a moment. Gail threw a lever that opened the shutters. They saw the three policemen scrambling madly to both sides as the *Chicago* started roaring down the field.

They blasted away and left the ground, the police still firing after them. Barnard clung to a bolted-down chair as they lurched wildly. Gail pointed the nose up until the ship would have been hanging from its props, if it had any.

"That's all we needed," said Barnard, sourly. "We're both outlaws now—fair game for anybody. Our only hope is to break the dope ring. And Lansfer, if we can."

She looked distastefully at him. "That would make a good story, wouldn't it? Daring reporter defies police; smashes *neoin* ring. Of course, there might be some opposition."

"Which way is Pluto?" he asked, changing the subject.

"I haven't the faintest idea. Hand me that book—the big one—"

IV

BARNARD found that space navigation was more complex than he had thought. He watched in grudging admiration as the girl rejected course after course. Finally she looked up at him and frowned.

"We have to go sunward—the sun is almost directly between us and Pluto. We can get there fast, and speed is our best bet to evade the Space Police. But it'll be dangerous."

"I'll take the chance," said Barnard. "But don't be reckless with your own life. How many months will it take?"

"About four days."

He stared suspiciously at her. "It took me fourteen days from Earth to Mars. What's this crate got that the Inner Planets Line hasn't?"

She smiled. "For a great reporter, you don't know much. They could make the Earth-Mars run in a day—but that's where the danger comes in. If a rock gets in their

path, they have to be traveling slow enough for the detectors to find it and change the course. That's done automatically, but we haven't powerful enough detectors yet to handle high speeds."

"Oh, a job for the instrument makers?" Barnard was beginning to realize his ignorance.

"You could put it that way. The chance of hitting anything big enough to hurt a space ship is small, of course, but with hundreds of ships in space, there would be a lot of wrecks if they all went as fast as we're going to go!"

THEY plunged almost directly into the sun, nose forward to cut down the radiant energy. Gail sat in a sea of charts and tables, calling out instructions to Barnard, who was learning to handle the controls. She kept the rockets blazing, and before many hours had passed they could almost see the sun growing in size.

In the growing warmth, the reporter dozed off to a restless, nightmarish sleep. He awoke with a start to find himself soggy with perspiration, his bones aching. Gail, hunched over her figures, looked up and grinned impishly.

"Warm?" she asked. "The cooling units are going full blast. The vision plates are all shuttered, but if you want to look, I've swung dark glass into place."

She gestured to one of the darkened vision plates, and her fingers slid to a button that opened the shutters. Barnard looked and closed his eyes when he saw the monstrous body that was the sun.

"I've seen enough," he assured her. "Where are we?"

"Inside the orbit of Mercury. We'll be closer before we're farther away."

Barnard studied her. At the most dangerous part of their journey, where space was filled with cosmic debris plunging into the sun, she had lost her hunted look and worked with a graceful nonchalance. She seemed actually to be enjoying the whole thing.

The murderous forces of radiant energy pounded at and through the heavily insulated hulls. Barnard mopped his sweat-soaked face and waited for the metal of the space ship to ignite. He stared at the girl and wondered how she could be so happy and poised, though she was as be-

dragged as he was. Was her mind gone, too?

He decided so when she told him, much later:

"Congratulations, Mr. Barnard. Right now you and I are closer to the sun than any other human beings ever have been—"

He studied her face.

She stared through the darkened glass into the inferno. "Except," she said thoughtfully, "for a few unfortunate expeditions that fell into it."

THEN they were starting to recede. The *Chicago* was inside the eccentric orbit of Vulcan, and starting to plunge away from the sun. The tremendous velocity they had been building up was far more powerful than the titanic pull of the sun's gravitational field. Gradually, the temperature went down to a cool 100 degrees, and the two humans, limp and worn, took turns catnapping.

Barnard lugged can after can of fuel for the tanks. The motors pounded constantly, building up greater and greater velocity. At timed intervals, Gail took sights of the visible planets to check their speed.

Their course curved far above the plane of the ecliptic. No passage through the asteroid belt at this speed!

That was Gail's main worry. "We're veering out of the crowded belt, but there're stray asteroids far from the ecliptic plane. If we pass that region, we'll be in fairly empty space, and more or less safe, except for the Space Police."

Barnard raised his eyebrows. "Space Police? How could they trace us at this speed?"

"We're as obvious as a green spaced Venusan in New York," she told him. "It's the speed—we're actually tearing up space. Lanfer's instruments could pick us out from a hundred million miles. But that's a lot of room." She glanced slyly at him. "Now you can write science articles for the Sunday supplements."

"Lay off me," he begged. His questing fingers found a cigarette as the clock ticked over to the hour. Smokes were rationed in space. He lit up and drew smoke into his hungry lungs, then passed the cigarette to Gail.

"At least," he said, "I have a job to do

on Pluto, which is more than you can say. What are you going there for?"

She passed the cigarette back.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," she said.

Barnard stared silently at her. She looked strangely happy, plunging toward God-knew-what evils on far Pluto! He felt suddenly disgusted with the whole affair. They were two fools, defying the Space Police for the right to seek certain death.

"Gail," he said, "don't go through with it. Slow the ship down and get off at the nearest human settlement—one of the Jovian moons, or Titan. I can handle this ship now. My syndicate will pay—"

The entire universe exploded then. He pounded brutally into the concave walls, whirling end over end as the ship spun madly out of control. His head crashed as the spherical control room escaped its gyroscopes and he fought desperately against crushing blackness. Gail—was she mangled, killed? There was a senseless spinning, and then it was dark . . . dark . . .

HE FOUGHT his way out of the blackness. Something was searing his throat . . . he coughed in agony and the shock brought him partly to his senses.

Gail was pouring brandy into him. He saw her by the hard glare of the battery-run light. She was bruised and her coveralls were torn, but she was alive.

He came to his feet and gripped her arms. "Gail?"

Then he stopped. Her eyes were pained and misting. She swayed and collapsed in his arms.

For a moment he was frantic. What to do? He carried her to her room, made her comfortable. Fervently, he hoped no bones were broken. But after a few minutes she opened her eyes and made a face at him.

"I'm not hurt," she said dreamily. "Just a sissy. Go and see what happened."

Gratefully, he watched her relax. He rubbed his hands thoughtfully and studied the damage in the control room. The meteor couldn't have hit very hard—they would have been killed without knowing it. A mere graze!

He reached out fearfully and cut off the blazing rockets. The vision plates were

blackened—no way of knowing which way they were going.

That was his first job, then—to unshutter the vision plates. He reviewed his knowledge of the mechanism. Evidently the master switch that controlled them all had been short-circuited. The switch was in the very tail of the ship. He crawled through the hold and into the tiny compartment in the tail.

His pocket flash picked out the switch, and he made with the screw driver. A few seconds later he looked proudly through the opened plate, feeling like a master mechanic.

But he didn't feel so happy when he saw a swifter-moving point of light in the star-filled sky.

A spaceship was closing in on the *Chicago*. And goose pimples rose on his arms when he recognized it as the police ship of Commander Lansfer.

He had to get back to the control room.

The police ship was coming in at a half mile a second, relative to them. What both ships were doing relative to the system he didn't know, or care. On his hands and knees in the close cubby, he scrambled around to get back to the control room. But already it was too late.

Invisible beams of magnetic force leaped into life between the two vessels, as the law ship clamped down with its Duvals. Barnard was pitched heavily forward as the beams seized the *Chicago*. His head crashed into something hard, and he fell into a relaxed bundle.

V

IT WAS COLD, and he was beating his way out of a frozen death. He fought his way up from the floor, a sluggish chill in the marrow of his bones. Frigid . . . and he was sinking back.

Remembrance shocked him into wakefulness. He stared from the port before his face. The police ship was there, clamped by invisible forces to the *Chicago*. Dully, he watched the fore rockets blasting for deceleration.

Deceleration—?

That brought him to frantic life. Were they nearing Pluto? How long had he been out? And—why was it so cold?

His teeth and knees still chattering, he

wriggled down the narrow passage, pushed his light before him into the room where he had left Gail. He stared wildly.

She was gone.

Then the police had come aboard while he was unconscious and taken her aboard their vessel.

Back in the control room, he stood helplessly for a few seconds, his mind starting to black out again. No power—the ship was leaking its heat into space. His numbed fingers found the right switches. Heat started to seep into the room, and life seemed to flow back into his body.

But Gail—what of her? His distrust of the solemn-faced Lansfer became suddenly more intense. He had to find out—and he was separated from the police ship by fifty feet that might as well have been miles.

There was another way. He fumbled in the medicine kit, snatched the black bottle labeled "*Espine*." He'd take a pill, even if it killed him in his weakened condition, and use ESP to find out what went on aboard the other vessel. He tore the stopper from the container and turned it upside down over his palm.

Nothing came out.

He cursed the empty bottle fervently, because already the only other answer was coming to his mind. He almost tried not to think of it. But this was emergency.

In one of his pockets he found the tiny packages of *neoin* he had bought while cultivating the peddlers on Mars.

There was a tiny pinch of gray powder in the paper he tore open. One gram—a normal dose. Full strength, he was sure—the stuff was seldom cut.

He hesitated. Even one dose of the drug created a craving for more. He vowed grimly that this first taste would be his last.

But this made his fight personal. He must destroy the source of *neoin* in sheer self-defense!

Before the gray powder was past his tonsils, he knew he had taken too much for a beginner. A fantastic lift, a great self-confidence almost sent his mind out of the world. Grimly he fought to keep down the giddy exhilaration, and let his thoughts search for Lansfer's ship.

He had trouble coordinating his thoughts, because of the tendency of his drugged

mind to stray. But he caught the control room of the police ship.

Carefully, he kept away from the minds of the four people there. There was an added lift when he perceived Gail, small and defiant, facing Commander Lansfer.

It was Barnard's first experience in extra-sensory perception. With all the power of his will, he focussed his thoughts on the scene. Gail was speaking.

"I tell you," she said, "the reporter is on Earth. He said something about having a big lead. I took the ship into Earth's atmosphere and he bailed out in a parachute. I was glad to be rid of him."

BARNARD hoped that what she said was entirely untrue.

"You say—" Lansfer's face was without expression—"that he forced you to do this?"

"I said no such thing," Gail told him. "And if you're going to twist my statements, I'll say nothing more."

Lansfer's palm flicked out and Gail's head reeled. A vivid patch of red appeared on her cheek. Barnard's fingers tightened around the spongy arms of his chair.

The commander turned swiftly to Remish and Grady. None of the officers noticed—but Barnard did—that Gail's fingers were sliding along the control board.

"Barnard is aboard that ship," Lansfer snapped. "You two couldn't have searched very thoroughly. This girl is lying—she couldn't possibly have slowed down enough to let Barnard 'chute to Earth, and still have come this far."

Remish looked uncertain. "Commander—you're the boss here, but—"

"But what?" Lansfer barked.

Remish's eyes darted briefly to where the red welts stood out on Gail's cheek. He licked his lips and for a second his gaze met Grady's. For a moment he hesitated, then faced Lansfer again. He shrugged briefly.

"Never mind," he said. "We'll talk it over at headquarters later."

Lansfer lost some of his poise. He glared at the two patrolmen. "You two get back to the *Chicago*. Find Barnard and bring him to me!"

Barnard saw Gail's hand hovering over the tiny bar. Suddenly he was shocked. He realized that the bar controlled the

Duvals—the magnetic beams that pinned the two ships together. Then she had felt his presence and was waiting for a signal from him. He shouted the thought:

"No!"

Swiftly she disobeyed him, and twisted the bar. In almost the same instant she snatched the gun from Lansfer's holster. She backed away a step and leveled it at the officer.

"Turn this ship around," she ordered. "We're going back to Mars."

Lansfer's narrowed eyes peered at the control board where she had disconnected the grapples. He turned to the girl. His voice was flat, sullen.

"Give me that gun."

"No." She backed away another step and he followed, hand reaching. Her face became paler. Lansfer stopped and stared into her eyes. His eyes were compelling, hypnotic. She stood motionless and tried to shake the effect. Lansfer moved a step closer.

Remish's hand gently removed the gun from her fingers.

Barnard swore disgustedly. Why had Gail cut the grapples? She must have some fool idea that he could beat the police to Pluto, win out on his own.

Maybe he could. There were only two little difficulties involved. First, he didn't know where Pluto was, or how to find it. Second—the planet was Earth-size, and where on its millions of square miles of surface was whatever he wanted?

The second problem was partly solved. From Lansfer's mind he had a vague picture of a vast white sea, trapped in a ring of white mountains that knifed into a black sky.

From Lansfer's mind—!

Even in his *neoin* jag, a jolt came to him. How did Lansfer know that? Frantically, his thoughts speared back to the police ship. But it was too far now—only confused fragments came.

But one image brought him to his feet, sobered and fearful for Gail's safety. Wildly he searched space for the magenta blasts of the police ship's rockets.

Because his extra-sensory perception brought one clear image. In Lansfer's pocket he had perceived the ancient twentieth century coin he had given to George Melvin.

VI

HIS FEVERED eyes studied the vision plate. Pluto—since they had been pointing toward it, must be ahead. He held his hand over a button, and cross hairs appeared on the plate. At the junction of the hairs was nothing.

but he found a grayish blob larger than the others at the edge of the plate. Experimentally, he turned in the rockets and headed for it. It moved steadily to the right, so it must be the planet.

Several hours later he was circling Pluto, searching grimly for the landmarks. A coating of frozen air covered everything—Pluto's last snow. Luck was with him, for he had only half-circled the globe when he saw what he wanted. There was no mistaking the scene. His pulse leaped as he dived inexpertly down.

Down past the snow sheathed peaks, into a great snow filled valley. He leveled off over the plain and brought his vessel to the surface in the thin solar illumination. He didn't know that landing on an airless planet was a feat for an expert pilot; neither did he realize that he was landing with blazing rocket jets on frozen air. But the luck of beginners was with him. He plowed a mile through the icy crust and jolted to a stop.

In his wake vast masses of freshly vaporized air clouded the valley and started to freeze again. Barnard's eyebrows lifted when he looked out.

"A snowstorm," he marveled.

He glared at the mountain wall a hundred yards distant. There was a structure there, of human origin. A squat building from around which the snow had been cleared.

George Melvin's space suit was too short for him, but he worked into it. Over the boots he fitted snow shoes. There was no sign of life from the shack, so he went out the lock and started trudging the hundred yards.

Inside the space suit, his footsteps were distant crunchings—eerie misfits in this noiseless dead world! Still there was no indication of life from the building ahead. He noted that it was flush against the cliff wall. Was there a cave behind?

A sudden craving for *neoin* filled him. He cursed and went forward more grimly. If

this was the source of the drug, he must destroy it.

The door was unlocked. He hesitated, then stepped inside cautiously. He glanced back once. The snow was still falling.

His light revealed a small room. It was bare, except for a few tins of food and some motor parts. He frowned, wondering. Had he stumbled onto an innocent government post?

There was a door leading back. Then his guess was right—this was a cave. He tried the door. It opened smoothly; and he followed his light in.

There was a corridor. He paused for a moment, an instinctive fear bringing cold goose pimples. Something was here—something terribly alien, and terribly deadly. He waited, his heart pounding viciously.

But nothing happened. Slowly he moved forward. On his right was a door. He reached to open it, but a strange reluctance made him leave it for the time being and continue on. The corridor ended in stairs, going down.

He started down, his knees weak. Before he reached the bottom, he saw what was below, the floor of the great underground room was covered with a gray powder.

Neoin!

VII

KNEE DEEP in it, he stared at the tons of the deathly drug piled around him. This was it! The cache from which misery and nightmare death was dispensed to the human race! But what was its origin?

One huge heap of the gray dust rose half way to the twenty-foot ceiling of the crypt. His eyes caught the tiny disturbance at the peak of the pile, and followed a thin stream of the falling dust to the ceiling.

The *neoin* came from above, then. And the door he had passed in the corridor above must lead to the place where the drug was formed. He plodded back up the stairs.

Before the door he stopped, that chill fear again speeding his pulse. A racial fear of something not human, not of Earth, palsied him. He wanted a dose of *neoin*—

His curse broke the spell and he flung

the door open. He was inside, poking his flash into the distant corners of the huge cave. It must be two hundred yards to the far wall. The roof was fifty feet above. On the sloping floor was a film of *neoin* dust.

In a corner was a rocket motor, turning senselessly. It served no apparent purpose. But he backed away.

"Nothing here," he murmured. Still the feel of alien life persisted. Suddenly in an unreasoning panic, he whirled for the door. And felt himself hurled back.

Cold, slimy fingers seemed to be feeling inside his brain. He struck out at empty space, his involuntary scream pounding in his ears. The questing feeler went deeper into him and he staggered helplessly back until he rested against the cave wall.

A chaotic jumble of thoughts whirled in his semi-consciousness. He felt that he was George Melvin, who had stowed aboard a ship belonging to a hard faced police officer.

Ron Barnard fought back with a defiant blast of his will and for a moment the creeping things stopped. He was suddenly sober, for he knew that this was where George Melvin had lost his mind. These creatures—whatever they were—possessed all of George's thoughts.

And those thoughts included Lansfer. Lansfer was the man behind the *neoin* organization.

The things were back. He stiffened his knees, made himself rigid against the wall. Sharp pain lanced through his temples as the weird struggle continued. Desperately he fought the hungry tentacles that wiggled into his thought centers.

One after another, he forced back the alien thrusts. But each time, the creatures took something with them . . . some part of him.

He was losing. Soon he would be another George Melvin . . . a drooling idiot. Already he was slipping. The feelers pushed themselves inexorably in. He noticed vaguely that his light was gone—somehow he knew that they had drained the juice from his battery. In the dark he stood swaying, waiting for the end.

Suddenly he was aware that it was light. He gazed dully toward its source, saw that a silver-helmeted figure was approaching.

Lansfer. The officer's hard face relaxed a little in a short chuckle.

"So you've found my secret, Ron Barnard. And you're wishing you hadn't—if you still have the wits to wish."

His eyes behind the faceplate were mocking. "My little friends were hungry. They aren't of this solar system, Barnard—they're true energy creatures, barely visible if you have good eyes. I was attacked by them while alone in a patrol ship—fortunate for me that I found out in time that silver renders them inert."

Barnard's slow moving mind noted the silver covering over Lansfer's helmet. He found himself on his knees, clutching unintelligently at the *neoin* dust on the floor. The struggle in his mind had died out, as if the creatures had retreated unwillingly before the silver.

"I brought them to this cave," Lansfer went on. "You see the rocket motor in the corner—they live on energy and for the cost of a little fuel I get *neoin* by the ton! *Neoin* is the waste product of their life cycle! Matter from energy—with living machines!"

The officer motioned toward the door. His stubby gun was in his hand. "You'll come back here, Barnard. A human mind is a rare treat for my helpers. But get out now and let your girl friend see what's happened to you. The two of you forced my hand. Now I'll have to get rid of Remish and Grady. It's time for action—my days as a policeman are over."

His eyes were hungry. "I have gold here, Barnard. And platinum and radium. *Neoin* has made me rich. The next step is power—I have enough to buy Mars and Venus, and next I'll bring *neoin* to Earth. In a few years I'll be running the solar system. Wouldn't you like to print that?"

Dully, Barnard preceded him out. His brain was slow responding, as if he were drugged. Permanently drugged. But his will seemed left, as if the energy creatures had been eating away the pillars of his driving force when they could not beat it down directly.

"Silver in the door," said Lansfer, closing it behind him. "They can't escape. Keep moving."

Back in the shack, Lansfer motioned him to a corner and peered out. More

snow was falling and three space suited figures were coming through it. Lansfer touched a switch and machinery began to throb. The room filled swiftly with air and warmth, and Lansfer removed his helmet and struggled out of his space suit. Gun in hand, he stood facing the double doors.

Barnard's gloved fingers were clenched. He gazed dully at his right palm, saw it filled with *neoin* he had unwittingly scooped up when he had clawed wildly in the cave of the energy creatures. He felt the craving coming back as he stared at it.

Gail came through the lock, followed closely by Remish and Grady. They stopped when they saw the gun in Lansfer's hand.

"What happens, chief?" demanded Remish. His hand was near his own holster. "And what is this place?"

"First, drop your guns," Lansfer instructed. "Then take off your space gear."

The two patrolmen unbuckled their belts. Gail stared at Barnard.

"Ron—they've done it to you!" There was a sob in her voice. "I should never have got you into this—"

Barnard's eyes focussed stupidly on the girl. His thoughts came slowly. But the energy creatures had not finished their work—he was marshaling the mind power he had left, and a sullen anger was growing in him. With the slyness that often belongs to simple minded people, his gaze went to the handful of *neoin*, then to Lansfer, measuring the distance. Eight . . . ten feet. He pretended to stagger, came a little closer.

Lansfer chuckled contemptfully.

Gail was at his side. He reached out as if to push her away, and the same motion his hand shot out, releasing the *neoin* squarely into Lansfer's face.

IN THAT split second, Lansfer's eyes widened in horror. His hands streaked to his face to keep the gray death from his lips and nostrils. Remish was across the room, batting the gun from his hands.

While Lansfer still dashed the *neoin* away from him, Remish and Grady had guns trained on him.

"Now," said Grady, grimly, "what's this all about, Barnard?"

Barnard told them haltingly. He still

had sense enough to realize that his I. Q. was down about fifty per cent. His career as the top reporter of the system was done . . . all he had left was a grim determination.

He picked up the silver helmet, fitted it over his head.

"Ron—?" Gail's eyes were shocked. "What are you going to do?"

He turned silently, and they followed him to the door of the cave. He turned to Remish.

"I'm going back in there," he said.

"No!" Gail clutched at his arms. "Don't, Ron—you'll be George all over again, and I couldn't stand that—"

He bent down and kissed her, then pushed her gently aside. He looked at Remish.

The policeman hesitated.

"You owe me this much," said Barnard.

"You're putting me on a spot," Remish growled. "But go ahead, if you must."

As Barnard started to close the door behind him, he was thrown to the floor by Lansfer's sudden rush. The hard faced policeman threw a bolt over the door, then dived on Barnard, clutching for the helmet.

The reporter fought back instinctively. His feet went into Lansfer as the other dived on him. He rose as far as his knees and delivered short solid punches to the body as Lansfer clawed desperately for the silver band.

Suddenly Lansfer stiffened with an expression of utter horror and fell away.

For a minute Barnard watched, building up his own strength. Then he tore

the helmet from his head, hurled it far from him.

"Come on, you devils," he growled. "I want my mind back."

When Barnard dragged Lansfer out of the cave, his eyes were bright, and a happy grin was on his face. The first thing he saw was Gail, utterly miserable against a wall of the corridor. The first thing he did was kiss her amazed face.

"You're the boss now," he told the equally amazed Remish. "If you'll take a suggestion, let's find Lansfer's hoard and throw all the silver coins into that cave. That should put an end to the energy creatures."

Remish looked distastefully at the drooling thing that had been Lansfer and holstered his gun. He nodded.

"And we'll bring the rest of his treasure back to civilization. We can use it to rehabilitate *neoin* addicts."

He looked hopefully at Barnard. "When you print this, you won't be too hard on the Space Police? We could use some favorable publicity—"

Barnard was whispering to Gail. Both were grinning widely. Barnard turned his grin to Remish.

"We love the Space Police," he assured the officer. "Now, as the highest official on this planet, you have the power to marry people. If you'll hurry up, we'll be starting back to Earth on our honeymoon."

He was suddenly thoughtful. "And maybe to do a column or two for the System News Service!"

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Doorway to Kal-Jmar

By Stuart Fleming

Two men had died before Syme Rector's guns to give him the key to the ancient city of Kal-Jmar—a city of untold wealth, and of robots that made desires instant commands.

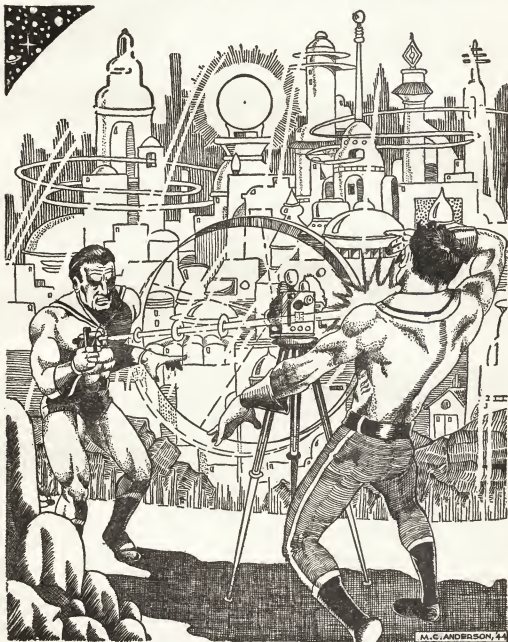


Illustration by ANDERSON

THE TALL MAN loitered a moment before a garish window display, his eyes impassive in his space-burned face, as the Lillis patrolman passed. Then

he turned, burying his long chin in the folds of his sand cape, and took up the pursuit of the dark figure ahead once more.

Above, the city's multicolored lights were

reflected from the translucent Dome—a distant, subtly distorted Lillis, through which the stars shone dimly.

Getting through that dome had been his first urgent problem, but now he had another, and a more pressing one. It had been simple enough to pass himself off as an itinerant prospector and gain entrance to the city, after his ship had crashed in the Mare Cimmerium. But the rest would not be so simple. He had to acquire a spaceman's identity card, and he had to do it fast. It was only a matter of time until the Triplanet Patrol gave up the misleading trail he had made into the hill country, and concluded that he must have reached Lillis. After that, his only safety lay in shipping out on a freighter as soon as possible. He had to get off Mars, because his trail was warm, and the Patrol thorough.

They knew, of course, that he was an outlaw—the very fact of the crashed, illegally-armed ship would have told them that. But they didn't know that he was Syme Rector, the most-wanted and most-feared raider in the System. In that was his only advantage.

He walked a little faster, as his quarry turned up a side street and then boarded a moving ramp to an upper level. He watched until the short, wide-shouldered figure in spaceman's harness disappeared over the top of the ramp, and then followed.

The man was waiting for him at the mouth of the ascending tunnel.

Syme looked at him casually, without a flicker of expression, and started to walk on, but the other stepped into his path. He was quite young, Syme saw, with a fighter's shoulders under the white leather, and a hard, determined thrust to his firm jaw.

"All right," the boy said quietly. "What is it?"

"I don't understand," Syme said.

"The game, the angle. You've been following me. Do you want trouble?"

"Why, no," Syme told him bewilderedly. "I haven't been following you. I—"

The boy knuckled his chin reflectively. "You could be lying," he said finally. "But maybe I've made a mistake." Then—"Okay, citizen, you can clear—but don't let me catch you on my tail again."

Syme murmured something and turned away, feeling the spaceman's eyes on the small of his back until he turned the corner.

At the next street he took a ramp up, crossed over and came down on the other side a block away. He waited until he saw the boy's broad figure pass the intersection, and then followed again more cautiously.

It was risky, but there was no other way. The signatures, the data, even the photograph on the card could be forged once Syme got his hands on it, but the identity card itself—that oblong of dark diamondite, glowing with the tiny fires of radioactivity—that could not be imitated, and the only way to get it was to kill.

Up ahead was the Founders' Tower, the tallest building in Lillis. The boy strode into the entrance lobby, bought a ticket for the observation platform, and took the elevator. As soon as his car was out of sight in the transparent tube, Syme followed. He put a half-credit slug into the machine, took the punctured slip of plastic that came out. The ticket went into a scanning slot in the wall of the car, and the elevator whisked him up.

THE TOWER was high, more than a hundred meters above the highest level of the city, and the curved dome that kept air in Lillis was close overhead. Syme looked up, after his first appraising glance about the platform, and saw the bright-blue pinpoint of Earth. The sight stirred a touch of nostalgia in him, as it always did, but he put it aside.

The boy was hunched over the circular balustrade a little distance away. Except for him, the platform was empty. Syme loosened his slim, deadly energy pistol in its holster and padded catlike toward the silent figure.

It was over in a minute. The boy whirled as he came up, warned by some slight sound, or by the breath of Syme's passage in the still air. He opened his mouth to shout, and brought up his arm in a swift, instinctive gesture. But the blow never landed. Syme's pistol spat its silent white pencil of flame, and the boy crumpled to the floor with a minute, charred hole in the white leather over his chest.

Syme stooped over him swiftly, found a thick wallet and thrust it into his pocket without a second glance. Then he raised the body in his arms and thrust it over the parapet.

It fell, and in the same instant Syme felt a violent tug at his wrist. Before he could move to stop himself, he was over the edge. Too late, he realized what had happened—one of the hooks on the dead spaceman's harness had caught the heavy wristband of his chronometer. He was falling, linked to the body of his victim!

Hardly knowing what he did, he lashed out wildly with his other arm, felt his fingertips catch and bite into the edge of the balustrade. His body hit the wall of the tower with a thump, and, a second later, the corpse below him hit the wall. Then they both hung there, swaying a little and Syme's fingers slipped a little with each motion.

Gritting his teeth, he brought the magnificent muscles of his arm into play, raising the forearm against the dead weight of the dangling body. Fraction by slow fraction of an inch, it came up. Syme could feel the sweat pouring from his brow, running saltily into his eyes. His arms felt as if they were being torn from their sockets. Then the hook slipped free, and the tearing, unbearable weight vanished.

The reaction swung Syme against the building again, and he almost lost his slippery hold on the balustrade. After a moment he heard the spaceman's body strike with a squashy thud, somewhere below.

He swung up his other arm, got a better grip on the balustrade. He tried cautiously to get a leg up, but the motion loosened his hold on the smooth surface again. He relaxed, thinking furiously. He could hold on for another minute at most; then it was the final blast-off.

He heard running footsteps, and then a pale face peered over the ledge at him. He realized suddenly that the whole incident could have taken only a few seconds. He croaked, "Get me up."

Wordlessly, the man clasped thin fingers around his wrist. The other pulled, with much puffing and panting, and with his help Syme managed to get a leg over the edge and hoist his trembling body to safety.

"Are you all right?"

SYME looked at the man, nursing the tortured muscles of his arms. His rescuer was tall and thin, of indeterminate age. He had light, sandy hair, a sharp nose, and—oddly conflicting—pale, serious

eyes and a humorous wide mouth. He was still panting.

"I'm not hurt," Syme said. He grinned, his white teeth flashing in his dark, lean face. "Thanks for giving me a hand."

"You scared hell out of me," said the man. "I heard a thud. I thought—you'd gone over." He looked at Syme questioningly.

"That was my bag," the outlaw said quickly. "It slipped out of my hand, and I overbalanced myself when I grabbed for it."

The man sighed. "I need a drink. *You* need a drink. Come on." He picked up a small black suitcase from the floor and started for the elevator, then stopped. "Oh—your bag. Shouldn't we do something about that?"

"Never mind," said Syme, taking his arm. "The shock must have busted it wide open. My laundry is probably all over Lillis by now."

They got off at the amusement level, three tiers down, and found a cafe around the corner. Syme wasn't worried about the man he had just killed. He had heard no second thud, so the body must have stayed on the first outcropping of the tower it struck. It probably wouldn't be found until morning.

And he had the wallet. When he paid for the first round of *culcha*, he took it out and stole a glance at the identification card inside. There it was—his ticket to freedom. He began feeling expansive, and even friendly toward the slender, mouse-like man across the table. It was the *culcha*, of course. He knew it, and didn't care. In the morning he'd find a freighter berth—in as big a spaceport as Lillis, there were always jobs open. Meanwhile, he might as well enjoy himself, and it was safer to be seen with a companion than to be alone.

He listened lazily to what the other was saying, leaning his tall, graceful body back into the softly-cushioned seat.

"Lissen," said Harold Tate. He leaned forward on one elbow, slipped, caught himself, and looked at the elbow reproachfully. "Lissen," he said again, "I trust you, Jones. You're obvi-obviously an adventurer, but you have an honest face. I can't see it very well at the moment, but I *kic*!—pardon—seem to recall it as an honest face. I'm going to tell you something, because I need

your help—help.” He paused. “I need a guide. D’you know this part of Mars well?”

“Sure,” said Syme absently. Out in the center of the floor, an AG plate had been turned on. Five Venusian girls were diving and twisting in its influence, propelling themselves by the motion of their delicately-webbed feet and trailing long gauzy streamers of synthesilk after them. Syme watched them through narrowed lids, feeling the glow of *culcha* inside him.

“I wanta go to Kal-Jmar,” said Tate.

Syme snapped to attention, every nerve tingling. An indefinable sense, a hunch that had served him well before, told him that something big was coming—something that promised adventure and loot for Syme Rector. “Why?” he asked softly. “Why to Kal-Jmar?”

Harold Tate told him, and later, when Syme had taken him to his rooms, he showed him what was in his little black suitcase. Syme had been right; it was big.

KAL-JMAR was the riddle of the Solar System. It was the only remaining city of the ancient Martian race—the race that, legends said, had risen to greater heights than any other Solar culture. The machines, the artifacts, the records of the Martians were all there, perfectly preserved inside the city’s bubble-like dome, after God knew how many thousands of years. But they couldn’t be reached.

For Kal-Jmar’s dome was not the thing of steelite that protected Lillis: it was a tenuous, globular field of force that defied analysis as it defied explosives and diamond drills. The field extended both above and below the ground, and tunneling was of no avail. No one knew what had happened to the Martians, whether they were the ancestors of the present decadent Martian race, or a different species. No one knew anything about them or about Kal-Jmar.

In the early days, when the conquest of Mars was just beginning, Earth scientists had been wild to get into the city. They had observed it from every angle, taken photographs of its architecture and the robots that still patrolled its fantastically winding streets, and then they had tried everything they knew to pierce the wall.

Later, however, when every unsuccessful attempt had precipitated a bloody uprising of the present-day Martians—result-

ing in a rapid dwindling of the number of Martians—the Mars Protectorate had stepped in and forbidden any further experiments; forbidden, in fact, any Earthman to go near the place.

Thus matter had stood for over a hundred years, until Harold Tate. Tate, a physicist, had stumbled on a field that seemed to be identical in properties to the Kal-Jmar dome; and what is more, he had found a force that would break it down.

And so he had made his first trip to Mars, and within twenty-four hours, by the blindest of chances, blurted out his secret to Syme Rector, the scourge of the spaceways, the man with a thousand credits on his sleek, tigerish head.

Syme’s smile was not tigerish now; it was carefully, studiously mild. For Tate was no longer drunk, and it was important that it should not occur to him that he had been indiscreet.

“This is native territory we’re coming to, Harold,” he said. “Better strap on your gun.”

“Why. Are they really dangerous?”

“They’re unpredictable,” Syme told him.

“They’re built differently, and they think differently. They breathe like us, down in their caverns where there’s air, but they also eat sand, and get their oxygen that way.”

“Yes, I’ve heard about that,” Tate said.

“Iron oxide—very interesting metabolism.” He got his energy pistol out of the compartment and strapped it on absently.

Syme turned the little sand car up a gentle rise towards the tortuous hill country in the distance. “Not only that,” he continued. “They eat the damndest stuff. Lichens and fungi and tumble-grass off the deserts—all full of deadly poisons, from arsenic up the line to xopite. They seem intelligent enough—in their own way—but they never come near our cities and they either can’t or won’t learn Terrestrial. When the first colonists came here, they had to learn *their* crazy language. Every word of it can mean any one of a dozen different things, depending on the inflection you give it. I can speak it some, but not much. Nobody can. We don’t think the same.”

“So you think they might attack us?”

Tate asked again, nervously.

“They *might* do anything,” Syme said curtly. “Don’t worry about it.”

The hills were much closer than they had seemed, because of Mars' deceptively low horizon. In half an hour they were in the midst of a wilderness of fantastically eroded dunes and channels, laboring on sliding treads up the sides of steep hills only to slither down again on the other side.

SYME stopped the car abruptly as a deep, winding channel appeared across their path. "Gully," he announced. "Shall we cross it, or follow it?"

Tate peered through the steelite nose of the car. "Follow, I guess," he offered. "It seems to go more or less where we're going, and if we cross it we'll only come to a couple dozen more."

Syme nodded and moved the sand car up to the edge of the gully. Then he pressed a stud on the control board; a metal arm extruded from the tail of the car and a heavy spike slowly unscrewed from it, driving deep into the sand. A light on the board flashed, indicating that the spike was in and would bear the car's weight, and Syme started the car over the edge.

As the little car nosed down into the gully, the metal arm left behind revealed itself to be attached to a length of thick, very strong wire cable, with a control cord inside. They inched down the almost vertical incline, unreeling the cable behind them, and starting minor landslides as they descended.

Finally they touched bottom. Syme pressed another stud, and above, the metal spike that had supported them screwed itself out of the ground again and the cable reeled in.

Tate had been watching with interest. "Very ingenious," he said. "But how do we get up again?"

"Most of these gullies peter out gradually," said Syme, "but if we want or have to climb out where it's deep, we have a little harpoon gun that shoots the anchor up on top."

"Good. I shouldn't like to stay down here for the rest of my natural life. Depressing view." He looked up at the narrow strip of almost-black sky visible from the floor of the gully, and shook his head.

Neither Syme nor Tate ever had a chance to test the efficiency of their harpoon gun. They had traveled no more than five hun-

dred meters, and the gully was as deep as ever, when Tate, looking up, saw a deeper blackness blot out part of the black sky directly overhead. He shouted, "Look out!" and grabbed for the nearest steering lever.

The car wheeled around in a half circle and ran into the wall of the gully. Syme was saying, "What—?" when there was a thunderous crash that shook the sturdy walls of the car, as a huge boulder smashed into the ground immediately to their left.

When the smoky red dust had cleared away, they saw that the left tread of the sand car was crushed beyond all recognition.

Syme was cursing slowly and steadily with a deep, seething anger. Tate said, "I guess we walk from here on." Then he looked up again and caught a glimpse of the horde of beasts that were rushing up the gully toward them.

"My God!" he said. "What are those?"

Syme looked. "Those," he said bitterly, "are Martians."

The natives, like all Martian fauna, were multi-legged. Also like all Martian fauna, they moved so fast that you couldn't see how many legs they did have. Actually, however, the natives had six legs apiece—or, more properly, four legs and two arms. Their lungs were not as large as they appeared, being collapsed at the moment. What caused the bulge that made their torsos look like sausages was a huge air bladder, with a valve arrangement from the stomach and feeding directly into the bloodstream.

Their faces were vaguely canine, but the foreheads were high, and the lips were not split. They did resemble dogs, in that their thick black fur was splotted with irregular patches of white. These patches of white were subject to muscular control and could be spread out fanwise; or, conversely, the black could be expanded to cover the white, which helped to take care of the extremes of Martian temperature. Right now they were mostly black.

The natives slowed down and spread out to surround the wrecked sand car, and it could be seen that most of them were armed with spears, although some had the slim Benson energy guns—strictly forbidden to Martians.

Syme stopped cursing and watched

tensely. Tate said nothing, but he swallowed audibly.

One Martian, who looked exactly like all the rest, stepped forward and motioned unmistakably for the two to come out. He waited a moment and then gestured with his energy gun. That gun, Syme knew from experience, could burn through a small thickness of steelite if held on the same spot long enough.

"COME ON," Syme said grimly. He rose and reached for a pressure suit, and Tate followed him.

"What do you think they'll—" he began, and then stopped himself. "I know. They're unpredictable."

"Yeah," said Syme, and opened the door. The air in the car *whooshed* into the near-vacuum outside, and he and Tate stepped out.

The Martian leader looked at them enigmatically, then turned and started off. The other natives closed in on them, and they all bounded along under the weak gravity.

They bounded along for what Syme figured as a good kilometer and a half, and they then reached a branch in the gully and turned down it, going lower all the time. Under the light of their helmet lamps, they could see the walls of the gully—a tunnel, now—getting darker and more solid. Finally, when Syme estimated they were about nine kilometers down, there was even a suggestion of moisture.

The tunnel debouched at last into a large cavern. There was a phosphorescent gleam from fungus along the walls, but Syme couldn't decide how far away the far wall was. He noticed something else, though.

"There's air here," he said to Tate. "I can see dust motes in it." He switched his helmet microphone from radio over to the audio membrane on the outside of the helmet. "*Kalis methra*," he began haltingly, "*setlin guna getal*."

"Yes, there is air here," said the Martian leader, startlingly. "Not enough for your use, however, so do not open your helmets."

Syme swore amazingly.

"I thought you said they didn't speak Terrestrial," Tate said. Syme ignored him.

"We had our reasons for not doing so," the Martian said.

"But how—?"

"We are telepaths, of course. On a planet which is nearly airless on its surface, we have to be. A tendency of the Terrestrial mind is to ignore the obvious. We have not had a spoken language of our own for several thousand years."

He darted a glance at Syme's darkly scowling face. His own hairy face was expressionless, but Syme sensed that he was amused. "Yes, you're right," he said. "The language you and your fellows struggled to learn is a fraud, a hodge-podge concocted to deceive you."

Tate looked interested. "But why this—this gigantic masquerade?"

"You had nothing to give us," the Martian said simply.

Tate frowned, then flushed. "You mean you avoided revealing yourselves because you—had nothing to gain from mental intercourse with us?"

"Yes."

Tate thought again. "But—"

"No," the Martian interrupted him, "revealing the extent of our civilization would have spared us nothing at your people's hands. Yours is an imperialist culture, and you would have had Mars, whether you thought you were taking it from equals or not."

"Never mind that," Syme broke in impatiently. "What do you want with us?"

The Martian looked at him appraisingly. "You already suspect. Unfortunately, you must die."

IT WAS a weird situation, Syme thought. His mind was racing, but as yet he could see no way out. He began to wonder, if he did, could he keep the Martians from knowing about it? Then he realized that the Martian must have received that thought, too, and he was enraged. He stood, holding himself in check with an effort.

"Will you tell us why?" Tate asked.

"You were brought here for that purpose. It is part of our conception of justice. I will tell you and your—friend—anything you wish to know."

Syme noticed that the other Martians had retired to the farther side of the cavern. Some were munching the glowing fungus. That left only the leader, who was standing alertly on all fours a short distance

away from them, holding the Benson gun trained on them. Syme tried not to think about the gun, especially about making a grab for it. It was like trying not to think of the word "hippopotamus."

Tate squatted down comfortably on the floor of the cavern, apparently unconcerned, but his hands were trembling slightly. "First why—" he began.

"There are many secrets in Kal-Jmar," the Martian said, "among them a very simple catalyzing agent which could within fifty years transform Mars to a planet with Terrestrially-thick atmosphere."

"I think I see," Tate said thoughtfully. "That's been the ultimate aim all along, but so far the problem has us licked. If we solved it, then we'd have all of Mars, not just the cities. Your people would die out. You couldn't have that, of course."

He sighed deeply. He spread his gloved hands before him and looked at them with a queer intentness. "Well—how about the Martians—the Kal-Jmar Martians, I mean? I'd dearly love to know the answer to that one."

"Neither of the alternatives in your mind is correct. They were not a separate species, although they were unlike us. But they were not our ancestors, either. They were the contemporaries of our ancestors."

"Several thousand years ago Mars' loss of atmosphere began to make itself felt. There were two ways out. Some chose to seal themselves into cities like Kal-Jmar; our ancestors chose to adapt their bodies to the new conditions. Thus the race split. Their answer to the problem was an evasion; they remained static. Our answer was the true one, for we progressed. We progressed beyond the need of science; they remained its slaves. They died of a plague—and other causes.

"You see," he finished gently, "our deception has caused a natural confusion in your minds. They were the degenerates, not we."

"And yet," Tate mused, "you are being destroyed by contact with an—inferior—culture."

"We hope to win yet," the Martian said.

Tate stood up, his face very white. "Tell me one thing," he begged. "Will our two races ever live together in amity?"

The Martian lowered his head. "That is for unborn generations." He looked at

Tate again and aimed the energy gun. "You are a brave man," he said. "I am sorry."

Syme saw all his hopes of treasure and glory go glimmering down the sights of the Martian's Benson gun, and suddenly the pent-up rage in him exploded. Too swiftly for his intention to be telegraphed, before he knew himself what he meant to do, he hurled himself bodily into the Martian.

IT WAS like tangling with a draft horse. The Martian was astonishingly strong. Syme scrambled desperately for the gun, got it, but couldn't tear it out of the Martian's fingers. And all the time he could almost feel the Martian's telepathic call for help surging out. He heard the swift pad of his followers coming across the cavern.

He put everything he had into one mighty, murderous effort. Every muscle fiber in his superbly trained body cracked and surged with power. He roared his fury. And the gun twisted out of the Martian's iron grip!

He clubbed the prostrate leader with it instantly, then reversed the weapon and snapped a shot at the nearest Martian. The creature dropped his lance and fell without a sound.

The next instant a ray blinked at him, and he rolled out of the way barely in time. The searing ray cut a swath over the leader's body and swerved to cut down on him. Still rolling, he fired at the holder of the weapon. The gun dropped and winked out on the floor.

Syme jumped to his feet and faced his enemies, snarling like the trapped tiger he was. Another ray slashed at him, and he bent lithely to let it whistle over his head. Another, lower this time. He flipped his body into the air and landed upright, his gun still blazing. His right leg burned fiercely from a ray-graze, but he ignored it. And all the while he was mowing down the massed natives in great swaths, seeking out the ones armed with Bensons in swift, terrible slashes, dodging spears and other missiles in midair, and roaring at the top of his powerful lungs.

At last there were none with guns left to oppose him. He scythed down the rest in two terrible, lightning sweeps of his

ray, then dropped the weapon from blistered fingers.

He was gasping for breath, and realized that he was losing air from the seared-open right leg of his suit. He reached for the emergency kit at his side, drawing in great, gasping breaths, and fumbled out a tube of sealing liquid. He spread the stuff on liberally, smearing it impartially over flesh and fabric. It felt like liquid hell on the burned, bleeding leg, but he kept on until the quick-drying fluid formed an airtight patch.

Only then did he turn, to see Tate flattened against the wall behind him, his hands empty at his sides. "I'm sorry," Tate said miserably. "I could have grabbed a spear or something, but—I just couldn't, not even to save my own life. I—I halfway hoped they'd kill both of us."

Syme glared at him and spat, too enraged to think of diplomacy. He turned and strode out of the cavern, carrying his right leg stiffly, but with his feral, tigerish head held high.

He led the way, wordlessly, back to the wrecked sand car. Tate followed him with a hangdog, beaten air, as though he had just found something that shattered all his previous concepts of the verities in life, and didn't know what to do about it.

Still silently, Syme refilled his oxygen tank, watched Tate do the same, and then picked up two spare tanks and the precious black suitcase and handed one of the tanks to Tate. Then he stumped around to the back of the car and inspected the damage. The cable reel, which might have drawn them out of the gully, was hopelessly smashed. That was that.

THEY started off down the canyon, Syme urging the slighter man to a fast clip, even though his leg was already stiffening. When they finally reached a climbable spot, Syme was limping badly and Tate was obviously exhausted.

They clambered wearily out onto the level sands again just as the small, blazing sun was setting. "Luck," grunted Syme. "Our only chance of getting near the city is at night." He peered around, shading his eyes from the sun's glare with a gauntleted hand. "See that?"

Following his pointing finger, Tate saw a faint, ephemeral arc showing above a

line of low hills in the distance. "Kal-Jmar," said Syme.

Tate brightened a little. His body was too filled with fatigue for his mind to do any work on the problem that was baffling him, and so it receded into the back of his mind.

"Kal-Jmar," whispered Syme again.

There was no twilight. The sun dropped abruptly behind the low horizon, and darkness fell, sudden and absolute. Syme picked up the extra oxygen tank and the suitcase, checked his direction by a wrist compass, and started toward the hills. Tate rose wearily to his feet and followed again.

Two hours later, Kal-Jmar stood before them. They had wormed their way past the sentry posts, doing most of the last two hundred meters on all fours. With skill and luck, and with Syme's fierce, burning determination, they had managed to escape detection—and there they were. Journey's end.

Tate stared up at the shining, starlight towers in speechless admiration. If the people who had built this city had been decadent, still their architecture was magnificent. The city was a rhapsody made solid. There was a sense of decay about it, he thought, but it was the decay of supreme beauty, caught at the very verge of dissolution and preserved for all eternity.

"Well?" demanded Syme.

Tate started, shaken out of his dream. He looked down at the black suitcase, a little wonderingly, and then pulled it to him and opened it.

Inside, carefully wrapped in shock-absorbing tissue, was a fragile contrivance of many tubes and wires, and a tiny parabolic mirror. It had a brand new Eolecop 210 volt battery, and it needed every volt of that tremendous power. Tate made the connections, his hands trembling slightly, and set it up on a telescoping tripod. Syme watched him closely, his big body tensed with expectation.

The field was before them, shimmering faintly in the starlight. It looked unsubstantial as the stuff of dreams, but both men knew that no power man possessed, unless it was the thing Tate held, could penetrate that screen.

Tate set the mechanism up close to the field, aimed it very delicately, and closed

a minute switch. After a long second, he opened it again.

Nothing happened.

The screen was still there, as unsubstantial and as solid as ever. There was no change.

TATE looked worriedly at his wiring, a deep wrinkle appearing between his pale, serious eyes. Syme stood stock-still but quivering with repressed energy, scowling like a thundercloud.

"It must be capable of working," Tate told himself querulously. "The Martians knew—they wouldn't have tried to stop us if— Wait a minute." He paced back and forth, biting his lip. Syme watched him with catlike eyes, clenching and unclenching his great fists.

Tate paused. "I think I have it," he said slowly. "I haven't enough power to hetrodyne the whole screen, although that's theoretically possible. But there must be weaker portions of the field—doors—set to open on the impact of a beam like this one. But I've only got power enough for two more tries. Jones, where would you put an entrance, if you'd built Kal-Jmar?"

Syme's eyes widened, and he stared around slowly. "A thousand years ago?" he muttered. "Two thousand? These hills were raised in five hundred. We can't go by topography.

"In front of one of the main arteries, then. But there are dozens, no one larger than the other. Did they have dozens of doors?"

"Maybe," said Tate. He pointed to the right, where the fairy towers of Kal-Jmar swept aside to leave a broad avenue. "It's the nearest—as good as any other."

They walked over to it in silence, and in silence Tate set up his equipment once more. He shifted it from side to side, squinting, until he had it lined up exactly on the center of the avenue. Then he took a long breath, and closed the switch again.

The switch came up. Syme stared with fierce eagerness, eyes ablaze. For a moment there was nothing, and then—

Tate clutched the big man's arm. "Look!" he breathed.

Where the ray from Tate's machine had impinged, a faintly-glowing spot of violet radiance! As they watched it widened,

dilating into a perfect circle of violet, enclosing nothingness. The door was opening.

"It worked," Tate said softly. "It worked!"

Syme shook off his grip impatiently, put his hand to the gun in the holster of his suit. Tate was still watching, fascinated. "Look," he said again. "The color is changing slightly, falling down the spectrum. I think that's a warning signal. When it reaches red, the door will close." He moved toward the widening door, like a sleepwalker.

"Wait," Syme said hoarsely. "You forgot the machine."

Tate turned, said, "Oh yes," and walked back. Then he saw the gun in Syme's hand. His jaw dropped slightly, but he didn't say anything. He just stood there, looking dumbly from the gun to Syme's dark face.

Syme shot him carefully in the chest.

He dropped like a rag doll, but Syme's aim had been bad. He wasn't dead yet. He rolled his eyes up, like a child. His lips moved. In spite of himself, Syme bent forward to listen.

"You'll be—sorry," Tate said, and died.

Air was sighing out through the widening hole in the screen. Syme straightened and smiled tolerantly. For a moment, he had been unreasonably afraid of what Tate was about to say. Some detail he had forgotten, perhaps, something that would trap him now that Tate, the man who knew the answers, was dead. But—he'd be sorry!

For what? Another dead fool?

He gathered up the delicate mechanism in one arm, and, filling his deep lungs, stepped forward through the opening.

THE TOWERS of dead Kal-Jmar loomed over him in the dusk as he strode like a conqueror down the long-deserted avenue. The city was full of the whisperings of Kal-Jmar's ancient wraiths, but they touched only a corner of his mind. He was filled to overflowing with the bright, glowing joy of conquest. The city was his!

His boots trod an avenue where no foot had fallen these untold eons, yet there was no dust. The city was bright and furbished waiting for him. He was intoxicated. *The city was his!*

There was a gentle ramp leading upward, and Syme followed it, breathing in the manufactured air of his pressure suit like wine. All around him, the city blazed with treasures beyond price.

It was his!

The ramp led to a portal set in the side of a shining needle of a building. Syme strode up to the threshold, and the door dilated for him. He stepped inside; the door closed and a soft light glowed on.

There was air here: good, breathable air. A tiny zephyr of it was blowing from some hidden source against his body. Greatly daring, he unfastened the helmet of his suit and flung it back. He breathed in a lungful of it. God, but it was good after that canned stuff! It was a little heady; it made his head swim—but it was good air, excellent air!

He looked around him, measuring, assessing for the first time. This room alone was worth a fortune. There was platinum; in ornaments, set into the walls, in furniture. That would be enough to buy the little things—a new ship, or perhaps even immunity back on Earth. But that was as nothing to the rest of it, the things three worlds would clamor for—the artifacts, the record books, the machines!

He strode about the room, building plan on grandiose plan. He could take back only a little with him at first; but he could return again and again, with Tate's mechanism and new batteries. But he'd explore the city thoroughly before he left. Somewhere there must be weapons. An invincible weapon, perhaps, that a man could carry in his hand. Perhaps even a perfect body screen. With that he wouldn't have to steal away from Mars on a freighter, hiding his loot and his greatness in a dingy engine room. He could walk into

a Triplanet ship and order its captain to take him wherever he chose to go!

HE STOOD then in the middle of the room, arms akimbo, his head swimming with glory—and remembered suddenly that he was hungry. He felt in the container of his helmet, extracted a couple of food tablets, and popped them into his mouth.

They would take care of his needs, but they didn't satisfy his hunger. No food tablets for him after this! Steaks, wines, souffles. . . . His mouth began to water at the very thought.

And then the robot rolled on soundless wheels into the room. Syme whirled and saw it only when it was almost upon him. The thing was remarkably lifelike, and for a moment he was startled.

But it was not alive. It was only a Martian feeding-machine, kept in repair all these millennia by other robots. It was not intelligent, and so it did not know that its masters would never return. It did not know, either, that Syme was not a Martian, or that he wanted a steak, and not the distilled liquor of the *xopa* fungus, which still grew in the subterranean gardens of Kal-Jmar. It was capable only of receiving the mental impulse of hunger, and of responding to that impulse.

And so when Syme saw it and opened his mouth in startlement, the robot acted as it had done with its degenerate, slothful masters. Its flexible feeding tube darted out and half down the man's gullet before he could move to avoid it. And down Syme Rector's throat poured a flood of *xopa*-juice, nectar to Martians, but swift, terrible death to human beings. . . .

Outside, the last doorway to Kal-Jmar closed forever, across from the cold body of Tate.



Invader from Infinity

By GEORGE WHITTINGTON

"Destroy the Invader," the orders read—and Captain McPartland's expendable spacer flashed into suicidal battle.



Illustration by ANDERSON

COMMANDER JON McPARTLAND stared with hard blue eyes into his view screen. He watched a tiny dot in one corner grow slowly, and

heard the unnecessary words of his Lieutenant-Commander, Clemens:

"Observation Officer reports enemy craft sighted, Sir."

"Very good," acknowledged McPartland. "Have Lieutenant Parek compute their speed and course."

Clemens spoke softly into the intra-ship phone, and Commander Jon McPartland returned momentarily to his thoughts. His square jaw was set as though cast in bronze, with hard muscles machined into its contour.

Here was the enemy—the unknown, the alien, who spoke only with destruction! This was the ship that had destroyed System patrols; later a full battle fleet of the Solar System's most powerful space fighters. The interceptors had been unable to establish communication of any sort; and they were blasted into fiery chunks of space debris before getting close enough to use their own guns.

"Well, here they are, Clemens," the Commander said aloud, "and getting uncomfortably close to the System. It looks like they're some other System's dominant intelligence, and we've got planets they want."

"Yes, sir," said the other, "and here we are, with the fastest, most heavily armed space fighter ever built—in the System."

"In the Universe," snapped McPartland. His full lips curved into a grim smile. "Under sealed orders which every citizen from Pluto to Mercury knows are: 'Destroy this ship—or it conquers our System.'"

Lieutenant-Commander Clemens bent to his intra-phone, turned to relay. "Navigation Officer reports enemy ship has altered course to head on. Speed fifty Spatial units."

"Thank you," McPartland stepped to the phone himself.

"This is it, men. You know what it means!" His hands flicked levers swiftly, as he spoke to component units individually:

"Propulsion—full speed ahead. Make every blast tell!

"Navigation—evasive course. Swing wide to draw them away from the System so that if—if—"

"I understand, sir," came the crisp reply from Lieutenant Parek.

"All ray stations," went on McPartland, "fire at maximum range. Radio—any contact?"

"None, sir."

"Magnetic screen interference?" asked the Commander.

"No, sir. No magnetic defense screens apparent on enemy."

"Put ours up full power." Jon McPartland was smiling now, but his eyes were flashing hatred of the alien. Another ten seconds would find them in effective range. The enemy was looming in the view screen, a round glistening sphere—a ball of destruction pitted again his own slim, sleek avenger.

"Screens up, sir, full power," came the response.

Lieutenant-Commander Clemens had headphones clamped over his ears. He was standing by for reports from stations. He turned suddenly, face lined and taut, and reported almost in a whisper:

"We're hit, sir, right through our screens at this range! Partial disintegration in section four. Bulkheads holding."

The Commander was standing wooden-faced, incredulous. But the hatred was building up in his eyes until Clemens shuddered.

"Through our defense screens at this range!" McPartland ground out savagely. He turned back to his view screen with a bitter oath.

There was the sphere, gleaming, flashing against the bottomless black of space—catching starlight, and throwing it back as though the touch of that pure light was distasteful.

What form of intelligence destroyed, killed without warning—without speech?

CLEMENS' voice broke into the red haze that hovered over his Commander: "Hit again, sir, Section 8. Almost complete disintegration of hull. Bulkheads holding."

Jon McPartland spoke his thoughts aloud. "I saw the ray that time, just a faint glimmer across the black. It should have hit Section 6! And—and THEY have no magnetic screen!"

His hand flicked a lever. "Navigation—break away! Straight course back toward the System."

There was a long pause before Lieutenant Parek replied. It was easy to guess his thoughts; quitting, running away! Then he answered; "Yes, sir!"

Clemens' voice, speaking softly to the

intra-ship, was suddenly the only sound in the control room above the muted whine of generators underneath. Jon McPartland, his battle-ending order acknowledged, glared silently into his screen.

There the hateful silver sphere shrank slightly in size. Once again McPartland caught the faint flicker of a ray, the star-studded blackness. The Commander looked a fierce question at Clemens.

"No further damage, sir," said the latter. He laid the headphones aside. "I believe we are out of range. Lieutenant Parek reports our speed sixty-five Spatial Units; we are drawing away from the enemy."

There was no relief in the last words; and Commander McPartland felt a sudden surge of sympathy for the other break through his own bitter anger. Clemens had been gloomy about their chances in the battle; now, the Earth ship broke away from the fight, the Lieutenant-Commander was gloomier in the belief that they hadn't tried hard enough—that they'd turned in cowardly flight. His eyes avoided his superior's.

The latter looked about the room, and no glance was raised to meet his own. Reynolds, the Ray Control Officer stared glumly at his calculators, and fingered the phone that had waited vainly for his range data and fire commands. Clemens, stood quietly, awaiting orders. Engineer McTavish sat in stony silence, gaze fixed on the desk before him, where sensitive indicators flashed red damage signals against a three dimensional scale projection of the ship.

McPartland felt his eyes misting, and ground his teeth, remembering the alien ship and using his hatred of it to fight back the weakness of his own pride in his men. They wanted to fight! They hated cowardice almost as much as they did the murderers they were running from; and these Earthmen thought their own commander a coward. But discipline and training held them to his judgment.

"Hell!" barked McPartland. "We're going back after them."

His words shattered the silence and the gloom. Reynolds' face was suddenly radiant; Clemens relaxed into an expression of smug worry; McTavish grunted.

"Mister McTavish, what about that damage?" demanded the Commander.

Engineer McTavish brought his lanky form up from the chair and into rigidity. "You gave no orders, sir," he reproached, his grey eyes eager.

"Have your men break out two space-suits, Mister," said McPartland. "You and I will go through the bulkheads and inspect the damaged hull."

"Yes, sir." McTavish turned eagerly to his phone.

"Mister Clemens," snapped the Commander, "hold our course. And you may tell the men we're not through fighting."

McPARTLAND and McTavish stepped carefully through the darkness of section four. Behind them, the bulkhead door had been securely dogged shut against the vacuum of space; before them was a ragged jet patch from which distant stars sent faint light to outline the great rip in the hull.

Both men carried powerful flashlights, but preferred to step carefully among dim outlines rather than use lights until they reached the hull. There had been a ray gun here—and its crew; and men, suddenly exposed to cold and pressureless space, make grim corpses.

At the thought, McPartland's big hand gripped the hammer he carried, so that he almost felt the handle through his heavy gauntlet. He had an insane desire to leap out and wait for the other ship—to batter at its silver hull!

As though sensing the thought, the Engineer broke in, speaking through his suit-communicator: "Here we are, sir."

The flashlight blazed in his hand, its beam spreading along the twisted broken metal of the ship's side. Instantly the big hammer flashed into the beam and against the metal near its broken edge, swung with every ounce of fury and strength in Jon McPartland's arm, shoulder and torso.

"If I'm right," he muttered with the swing, "we'll know it now. We'll have a fighting—chance."

He faltered on the last word, as his blow landed and sent some of its force smashing back up his arm and body. But the Commander knew—as a smith knows—the feel of metal under his strength; and Jon McPartland knew his hunch had been right even before McTavish cried:

"You—you bent it!"

"Right, Mister. I bent it. And I couldn't bend the steel that went into this ship's hull, could I, McTavish?"

"Blasting right you couldn't, begging your pardon, sir. No man could."

"Then it isn't steel any longer, McTavish—not near the edges of the spot their ray hit!" McPartland twirled the hammer in his hand, eager as a small boy just learning how to whip the neighborhood bully. "Where that ray hit there was disintegration at the center, transmutation at the edges."

Understanding was spreading over the Engineer's face behind the transparent helmet of his space suit. "Then, man, that ray has one magnetic charge; positive or negative, proton or electron."

"And your technicians will tell us which," ordered the Commander. "Get them busy cutting out samples. We want to know quickly. But you and I have enough to do while we wait, Mister."

He led the way back to the bulkhead. Inside, McTavish gave orders, while shedding his space suit and starting down the corridor to the control room.

McPartland explained as they went. "Our magnetic screens, having electrons and protons, bent their ray. I saw it. That made me think they used a mono-charged stream of particles. Some of the particles in the screen attracted the ray charges, others repelled them. You know, of course," he went on, "how our screens diffuse our own type of duo-charge beam at long range and protect the ship against them."

"Yes, man!" His Engineer agreed, excitedly now. "And beams from the screened ship go through on initial velocity. But they couldn't use a screen—the enemy: there'd be no balance of forces—they'd bend their own ray!"

"The way we'll bend it, Mister, when we go back after those murderers!" Jon McPartland took a deep, triumphant breath, and his face lit up with a battle smile that made the Engineer's heart lift.

"Mister McTavish, we're going to string a space lifeboat out behind us on about two miles of cable. You are going to rig up our dynamos to make this ship and the lifeboat the poles of an electromagnet. When your Technicians determine the polarity of the enemy ray, we'll make the ship the repelling pole."

"Then, man, begging your pardon, sir, we go back and let them blast," cried the Engineer. "Their ray curves away from us—toward the lifeboat. By the time they figure the trick out, we'll be close enough to blast them wide open."

"We'd better be," his superior concluded grimly. "Or the devils will blast away the lifeboat and the cable. Leave us without an electromagnet—right back where we started from."

COMMANDER JON McPARTLAND stared with hard blue eyes into his screen. He watched a dot growing into a sphere, and, anticipating the words of Lieutenant-Commander Clemens, ordered:

"Have Lieutenant Parek compute their speed and course."

Clemens, with a look of gloomy reproach at not having been allowed to report, bent to the intra-ship phone. Before he could speak, he straightened, and turned to relay the information coming through his headphones:

"Navigation Officer reports course head on, sir. Speed fifty Spatial Units."

"Thank you." The Commander looked at his Engineer. "All in readiness, Mister McTavish?"

"All in readiness, sir," replied the lanky engineer, his grey eyes twinkling as he added: "They're using an electron ray, and our ship is negative—but this'll be a positive jolt to the enemy, begging your pardon, sir!"

McPartland smiled, the tense muscles along his jaw relaxing for the first time in hours. Clemens coughed and turned aside, bringing a hand up over his mouth.

This effort to preserve his reputation was needed only for a moment. He straightened, adjusting his headphones, and reported:

"Enemy ship changing course, sir, swinging aside."

The Commander glanced quickly at the screen, disbelief flicking momentarily over his square features. He leaped to the intra-phone, snatching the headphones from the Lieutenant-Commander.

"Mister Parek," he ordered, "swing with that ship. We must get in close—quickly!" Aside to McTavish, he added: "I hope

the cable to that spaceboat holds when it snaps around on this turn."

"It will hold, sir," the Engineer assured him. "But we'll lose some speed by the drag—only until we re-accelerate, sir."

McPartland tossed the headphones back to Clemens, left the intra-phone, and went back to his screen. For the next few minutes he watched the alien silver sphere, flashing and glinting in the starlight.

John McPartland whispered, half to himself: "The cunning devils! They know something's up when a beaten ship comes back to fight again."

"Begging your pardon, sir," said Reynolds, the Ray Control Officer, in his quiet manner. "They must have seen the spaceboat strung behind and become suspicious."

"You're right, Mister," acknowledged the Commander. "The killers are careful of their skins." He glared at the hateful beauty of the other ship, growing no larger in his screen. "Come on," he challenged.

But the enemy avoided every effort of the earth ship to close in, turning inside. At last, the space fighters were carving a great circle in space, the Earthmen on the outside, traveling a greater distance so that superior speed was largely nullified.

McPartland glared into his screen. Clemens stood by his intra-phone, relaying messages from Parek. Reynolds sat before his calculators, unmoving except for fingers caressing the mike that still waited for his words. McTavish sprawled before his three dimensional model, his grey eyes going over and over every line of it.

At last the Commander spoke the thought in the minds of all four: "We're six Spatial units apart. Maximum range of their ray is five units; ours is four. Coming head on, we pass through the gap between their range and ours in seconds—we almost made it last time! But, if we overhaul them from behind, it might take minutes to close that gap with our speed advantage."

"Right, sir," McTavish agreed, "and minutes would be long enough for them to blast our spaceboat and cable away."

"And then us," finished Clemens. He drew himself up. "I am ready, sir, when you give the order."

Blazing anger faded from the Commander's eyes and face. "Thank you, Mister Clemens. I know you are, and so is every

man of our crew. But we're here to save the System, and there's still hope.

"These animals have come a long way," he said jabbing a fist toward the ship in the screen. "They think they can afford to wait us out. But maybe they can't. Mister Clemens, ask Radio to try and contact Earth."

IT TOOK long, anxious minutes to make the contact. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Parek held the ship on the same course, with instructions to close at once if the enemy moved toward them.

But the situation remained unchanged, the great circle being traced and retraced through space, ray guns trained, unused. At last, Radio reported contact.

Jon McPartland stepped to the visaphone. Before him, the faint image of Marshal Denton, supreme commander of all System forces, flickered uncertainly over the great distance.

"McPartland," came the Marshal's voice, thin and wavering through the poor connection. "I knew you'd do it!"

McPartland saluted smartly. "We have met the enemy, sir, and stopped their advance toward the System, but—"

He went on, reporting their first encounter, his decision and action, and concluded: "Sir, we can hold them here until help reaches us. One more ship—rigged as we are—even the slowest old hulk in the fleet—and we can finish them!"

There was a long pause. Marshal Denton drew himself up, his face, only a dim blob on the screen, gave no hint of his emotions as he answered. "Commander McPartland, I must refuse your request for reinforcements." There was no mistaking his feeling in the next words:

"Jon, I've got a System of confidence in you, but my hands are tied. The Supreme System Congress of Specialists has met and made decisions for defense—decisions that are not subject to change. From here on, I can only carry their strategy into effect."

McPartland stood rigidly. He was stunned. He heard his own voice, as from far away; "And those decisions, sir?"

"Every ship we have is concentrated just beyond Pluto's orbit." Denton answered. "They are arranged in a defensive pattern of depths, that the Specialists

consider impenetrable." His voice was even.

"Sir," the Commander groaned, "this attacker has the range and a ray that makes our magnetic screens useless. These fiends will go through that fleet like light through glass. And the planets—they've been disarmed for years! They'll be defenseless!"

In the screen, the Marshal's dim figure slumped. "Jon, the Specialists rule the System."

"I understand, sir," McPartland heard himself say. "What are your orders, sir?"

"Just your best, Commander Jon McPartland. That will be the best any of us could give. Good luck!"

"Thank you, sir." McPartland turned from the visa-phone as Marshal Denton faded from view.

Lieutenant-Commander Clemens stood ready beside his intraphone. Engineer McTavish sprawled before his model, his grey eyes going lovingly over every line of it. Ray Control Officer Reynolds fingered his mike.

Jon McPartland swept them with his blue eyes, turned to glare again at the taunting silver sphere in his view screen. He started to speak, stopped as Reynolds raised his head.

"Beg your pardon, sir," said the Ray Officer. "May I give the men false range data when—when—you decide we're finished, sir? I'll feel better just using this stuff, and the gun crews—those that are left—will feel better thinking they're striking a blow for the System."

"It can't do any harm, sir," he pleaded as the Commander snapped his mouth shut, staring hard.

"REYNOLDS," bellowed the Commander, "ages ago there was an airfighter who opened fire on his enemy with machine guns before he was in range. The opponent usually took evasive action—thinking he was in danger—and lost speed, so that this fighter could overtake and destroy him."

"Reynolds, you're a genius!"

"Man," interrupted McTavish, "our rays would fall short! Those devils wouldn't be fooled by rays—two Spatial units away!"

"No, Mister McTavish," his superior replied slowly, "our disintegrator rays wouldn't fool them. But we have landing

searchlights that throw a beam a dozen Spatial units.

"McTavish get down to those beams; stop a couple down to pencils; shade them to throw a pretty violet-colored finger; cut down the power so they'll reach about six units! Get out of here!"

The Engineer's lanky body was already through the control room door. Jon McPartland was grinning. A grin that didn't fade even when he looked back to his screen, to see the glinting silver sphere swinging serenely along beside them. He turned to Clemens.

"Tell Lieutenant Parek to close at full speed the second they start for us. No evasive action—straight course and let the spaceboat and cable take it!"

"Navigation acknowledges, sir." Clemens replied solemnly, and the Commander knew his Lieutenant had anticipated and given the order.

"All ray stations ready, sir," added the quiet Reynolds.

McPartland's grin broadened. "Give them the straight data, Mister Reynolds."

"Yes, sir."

It was only seconds later that a voice rang in Clemens' headphones, in accents loud enough to be heard through the silent, waiting control room. "McTavish reporting. All in readiness."

"Let them have it then," ordered the Commander. "But be sure you miss!"

With the suddenness of calculated surprise, a thin pencil of violet light stabbed out from the Earth ship. It knifed through space, scant yards behind the silver sphere, and winked out. A second beam reached forth, passed beneath the gleaming enemy.

Immediately, the sphere bobbed in space, began to weave an intricate course toward the Earth ship. It swelled in the view-screen before McPartland.

He laughed, a low savage sound. "A super-race ego, to think our gunners are that bad. But they'll learn!"

REYNOLDS began to drone into his phone, his eyes never leaving the calculators over which his fingers were flying. "Range five units, position—"

A faint flicker reached toward the Earth-ship, swung aside. McPartland laughed again.

"Range, four point nine," droned Rey-

nolds, and went on with steady flow of data.

The pale alien beam reached out again. This time Clemens reported. "Spaceboat destroyed by direct hit, sir."

"Range four point six," said Reynolds.

The sphere was looming ahead of them now, its ray sweeping off to the side, direction steady even as the sphere danced and spun.

"Range four point one—"

"Cable almost completely gone, sir," Clemens said.

"Steady," McPartland answered. He took a deep breath and heard the voice of the Ray Control Officer rising triumphantly:

"Units one-three, five and seven, Fire! Range four point zero, position—"

Four livid fingers of red sprang hungrily toward the silver sphere. They struck almost together, followed as the ship twisted and spun for brief moments. Then, when the ball of metal suddenly ceased its gyrations and floated limply, helplessly in space, those fingers probed, slashed unhindered through its vitals, over every foot of hull.

It was a scene of awesome destruction, as the ship that had thrown back starlight so proudly, haughtily, was blotted out of existence, its atoms torn apart and hurled back to the universe as free energy.

The glow in his viewscreen threw red highlights into McPartland's black hair, matched the blazing vengeance in his blue eyes. But he watched, jaw hard, fist clenched, until destruction was complete.

"They got what they gave our ships," he said at last, "merciless destruction. They deserved no better.

"We'll go back to the System, and turn in our report. Our Scientists will perfect a defense against a mono-charge ray, and we won't need to worry about handling any other ships that might follow this one."

"Right, sir," said McTavish. "And, man, begging your pardon, sir, I hope we're in on the handling!"

Lieutenant-Commander Clemens shook his head moodily. "We did well. But the Congress of Specialists will be disappointed. We didn't bring back prisoners for examination."

But his eyes were smiling—again.

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on one of the men you've met in preceding issues—those cosmic-minded artists who help to nourish Planet Stories and the Vizigraph.

But before we do, we wish to state that Anderson makes a base canard or two below. There were no five bucks involved, there were only two—and we didn't squeeze his neck—very hard. Anyway, just as we found him, clean, unspoiled, and almost unshaven, we give you—

MONEY MAD MURPHY!

Mageditor Peacock peered fiendishly through his horn-rimmed glasses. "Murph!" he said, said he, "my old pal! You old salt of the earth you! I love you more than my pay check!"

Knowing such a love impossible, I immediately detected the distinctly unpleasant odor of a rat and turned to flee, but in vain. A long, scrawny arm snaked out; cold, clammy fingers collared me. It hauled me beneath the mad gleam of a science-fiction mageditor (you know, one of those horrid creatures who is eternally haunted by bug-eyed monsters, keeps a flask of choice Saturnian wine handy in the right-hand middle drawer of his desk, and goes around trying to slit the throats of people who dislike his magazine).

"Murphy, old chum, old chap," he menaced, "you'll never know how much I love you!"

"Okay, okay," I managed to gasp as his fingers tightened around my windpipe, "how much do ya want, ya fiend?" His grip immediately loosened.

"Why—uh—a fin till February first will be swell," he gloated. So I slipped him a fin and sought to escape, but again his hold strengthened, and I knew that this time I could not buy my way out.

Mageditor Peacock's eyes gleamed like a firebrand. "Oh, Murphy," he drooled, "I know you'll do me a favor, *won't* you?" I squirmed helplessly, unable to answer.

So I'm writing this in self defense. 'Scuse please, but I gotta eat. Yeah, us artists eat just like humans.

I was born July 9, 1926, in that beautiful resort town of Asheville, North Carolina, located high in the Blue Ridge Mountains. There I lived until the age of eight when my family migrated to Greensboro, N. C., which was to become my permanent home.

In the spring of 1943 I graduated from high school by the skin of my teeth and then spent two quarters as a student at the University of North Carolina. Realizing that my time as a civilian was growing short, I decided to seek my fortunes as an artist in New York.

By the time you read this, I shall have left the pages of PLANET to don the Navy blue; but when this war's over, you can bet your bottom dollar I'll be back.

So, until then . . . So long. . . .

MURPHY ANDERSON.



Keeper of the Deathless Sleep

by Albert De Pina

Nardon, the Correlator, had banded together the greatest brains of the Solar System to battle the menace spawned by Saturn—was leading them into the stronghold of the Energasts themselves.

Illustration by ANDERSON



Nardon's sword sang in his hand.

"WE CANNOT FIGHT," Antaran said. "Not now . . . We must be patient a while longer. Venus still holds the secret of Vulcan base and without allotropic metal our fleet would be so much papier maché!" He fell silent.

In the soft, smoky-blue twilight of the great subterranean room beneath the Universarium, Bill Nardon gazed expressionlessly at the angular austerity of the Council Leader's face, and remained silent.

"Three more spacers today!" Antaran sank slowly into the yielding firmness of a priceless crysto-plast chair. "Disappeared . . ." He paused. "Must you have this hellish blue fog, Bill?" He frowned in distaste. Bill Nardon smiled slowly from where he lay on a great couch of alabastine, utterly relaxed. "Would you rather have a mountain night, a summer twilight, or dawn?" His great shoulders shook a little with silent laughter until the mane of dark red hair that hung to his shoulders

seemed to twinkle with pinpoints of light. He pressed a series of selectors on the back of the couch, and slowly a rosy light like a tardy dawn diffused through the room together with the smell of the sea. "Don't look so outraged, Antaran; that Spartan conditioning of yours is a tragedy!" The aged Council leader shrugged his shoulders.

"Listen to me!" Antaran said brusquely. "Half a hundred thousand men and women from six planets cannot be hidden away like so much plunder. Sooner or later someone is bound to escape and give away the mystery. Yet months have passed and no trace of them has been found. Correlate that!"

He sniffed at the marvelously fresh odor of the sea and blinked at the rose-gold light of the static dawn as if it weren't a scientific and artistic miracle, but something not quite decent.

"The loss in terms of life and treasure is negligible. It's what it purports in the long run that's serious. Already Venus has clamped down on shipments of radioactives and Mars has declared limited martial law. No trade with Neptune is possible in the face of their embargo, and the European coalition of Terrans and Panadurs have closed their world! The logical development of this psychological state of nerves is. . ."

"War." Bill Nardon said softly, almost in a whisper that died in the faint sea-breeze that eddied about the room. For a long time there was silence, while the "Correlator" played with the selectors on the couch unaware of doing so in his profound absorption, and the tardy dawn faded into bright daylight which in turn gave way to the perfumed mystery of a starry night deep within the mountains and the odor of pine stole about the room. A ripple of music almost as soft as a sigh invaded the chamber, gathering in volume and poesy of melody like an enchanted lullaby to a wonder child or, a woman utterly beloved.

When the "Correlator" came to, Antaran had gone

the spaceport, now glorious in its display of opulence for the benefit of the arriving delegations of five worlds. The Terran display of grandeur had been planned to increase with exquisite skill all the way to the *Universarium*.

Which in itself was a piece of effrontery. Bill thought with a sardonic smile, considering that with Earth, only six worlds were represented, which was far from being the Universe. Not to mention that each planet was sovereign, jealously and hypersensitively suspicious of the slightest encroachment upon their rights and domains. Bill was certainly aware of the fact that the world *Universarium* would be a cause for resentment.

They were arriving now. Upon the gigantic Ethero-solidograph that covered an entire wall of the spacious room, deep in the bowels of the *Universarium*, Bill Nardon could see the great interplanetary vessels emerge from outer space, where both space and time have but a remote and relative meaning, and flash like interstellar daggers into the outer fringe of the stratosphere.

"Warships! All of them!" He mused aloud, while the slightly satirical smile deepened, hovering on his square-cut lips, crinkling the corners of the long, strangely colored eyes—almost electric blue.

"Warships?" he mused.

Bill saw them extend lateral fins upon the icy fragility of the upper air, much as a bird extends its wings, and come shrieking through the tortured air in a mad race to be the first to land upon the expectant Earth. In great flawless spirals—beautiful beyond belief—they lost altitude, leaving behind a vortex of clouds boiling furiously at their passage. Venus was in the lead. Bill Nardon recognized the powerful cruiser by its insignia of a serpent biting its tail, fashioned of *Josmians*—Venusian pearls. Close behind it was Europa, with the insignia of a blazing Jupiter on its side; Neptune with its emblazoned shield of a tiered city, and little Mercury with the royal emblem of incandescent Sol. And at the very end, aloof, disdainful, the truly magnificent work of science and art that was the Martian vessel, which characteristically wore no emblem at all, and seemed to be content to be the last to arrive, so long as it kept from being

THE RAIN'S silver curtain had lifted for some time—over an hour now—Bill Nardon mused. The blinding blueness of the skies was reflected on the satiny sheen of the platino-plastic structures of

contaminated by close contact with the rays of other worlds than Mars.

A great swirl of ceremonial music rose from the immense spaceport, the cathedral-like architectonics weaving intricate patterns upwards to the skies as if to receive in an ocean of melody the arriving delegates.

Bill Nardon sighed, his task was about to begin. With a slight movement of his right hand, he touched the controls gleaming on the desk before him, and the scene at the spaceport rushed with vertiginous speed into close focus; still he was not satisfied, but continued to manipulate the Ethero-solidograph controls until the emerging occupants of the Venusian ship grew on the screen to life-size. With infinite care he studied and analyzed their faces, their exquisite fragile bodies with the long, membranous wings; noted the almost imperceptible shadow of baffled apprehension beneath the mask of imperturbability, and found—nothing. But that was to be expected. After all, of all the planets, Venus was the least warlike, which was fortunate indeed.

THE TALL, rangy Europeans, offspring of Terran colonists, with their strange, silver-furred Panadur co-rulers, came next. Bill lingered over the Panadur leader, so strangely human in his four feet of upright, slender body, completely furred in gleaming silver fur to the very throat-line, with the delicate triangular face dominated by immense beryl eyes. Strange creatures of a world within a world, drawing their sustenance from the eerie radioactive caverns of their great Jupiterian satellite. The Neptunians were descendants of Earthmen too, but subtly changed by the awesome environment of their gigantic world.

The Mercurians were a problem in themselves. For of all the planets, theirs was a ruthless Matriarchy. The striding, uncompromising Amazons that emerged from that blunt, utilitarian-looking ship, were in themselves a promise of trouble. They gazed around them out of blazing dark eyes, and their metallic complexions seemed to flow oddly like quicksilver with their movements, as if their features were fluid. Only the eyes, hard, suspicious, expecting the worst, retained their unyielding char-

acter. When the Martians emerged, tall, tawny-haired, with their immense violet eyes and exaggeratedly narrow waists, that contrasted with their broad shoulders, it occurred to Bill that the least accident would precipitate an holocaust that would end in the most gigantic hecatomb the universe had ever seen. He shuddered to think what would happen if the least delegate were to meet with harm. From the very beginning, he had protested against this interplanetary meeting on Terra, and great as his influence was, profound as the respect was in which his unique powers were held, the Council vote had been against him.

Still, Bill Nardon could not rid himself of the feeling that this was a wild goose chase, that nothing would be accomplished by a meeting of the highest dignitaries of the Inter-Planetary League—in short, that the great danger of an *accident* that was being incurred was not only unnecessary—but futile, which was far worse.

Asprawl in the great hetero-plastic chair, his long legs extended, his superb torso completely relaxed, he looked as if even his great muscles would never again lift that magnificent body upright. But all the while his unique mind was absorbed in assembling multitudes of details and facts, coordinating and correlating psychological factors and psychic coordinates with the speed of thought into a clear picture which in the end proved—absolutely nothing. He was baffled. To the tragic problem which would soon be under discussion in the stupendous *Universarium*, expressly built for that momentous purpose, he would be able to bring precisely nothing.

For once he had failed. And Bill damned the cold efficiency of the Master Neurograph machine that had unerringly summarized his strange mental coordinates. For Bill's mind had the peculiar gift of being able to grasp a series of basic facts and from them deduce with supernal accuracy the individual answer to any *human* problem. What took the great Philosophers in Psychiatry VI days, and weeks, and even months to solve, Bill Nardon could coordinate and give the correct answer to in hours, sometimes minutes.

There was nothing mysterious about it. Given enough time, Bill Nardon could have explained in detail how he could solve

a particular problem in human equations—if he cared to, which he never did—it was merely a mental ratio of activity in the upper part of his brain, where the most involved and difficult thinking is done, many times greater than that of the normal human brain. To this was added an intensity and scope of awareness surpassing any Neuro-graphic records known. The result was the coordination of details, the synchronizing of factors—nay, *nuances* so tenuous that they were non-existent to even the philosophical minds.

As a result, Bill Nardon had been immediately removed from his job as an explorer and transferred to Security I, answerable only to the very head of the Supreme Council itself.

To him it had been a tragedy. The ecstasy of the vast reaches of space; the illimitable freedom, birthright of explorers, the intimate communion with the stars had been transmuted into a guarded existence as if he were one of the most valuable factors in the security of Earth, which unquestionably he was. Every luxury, every whim even, was his to indulge, he could have anything . . . literally anything, but freedom!

And now he had failed. In his sardonic mood he was glad that he had been unable to find even a tiny clue. In all that glittering, heterogeneous assemblage Bill had not found even a slight *nuance* to pounce upon. Involuntarily he shook his head, and the dark red mane that fell to his shoulders in the conventional style of the day, swirled about his shoulders, again he shook his head as if some almost imperceptible irritant were annoying him. And suddenly he sat upright, his eyes narrowed and steel-blue. In his intense absorption in the scene on the Ethero-solidograph, the elfin probing of his mind had gone unnoticed. A profound surprise mingled with the instant pointing of all his faculties as he became aware. That *anyone* could penetrate his mental defenses was unthinkable!

EVEN BEFORE his awareness of peril was complete, Bill became a blur of motion that coiled and sprang erect. And the incredible shape that had launched itself with razor-like talons outspread unerringly for the sprawling Terran's throat

thudded against iron-hard stomach muscles, over which a thin beryllium mesh tunic afforded protection. Almost at the very instant it struck, the creature launched itself again, with demoniacal fury, taloned hands reaching with super-human strength for the bared throat, its taloned feet trying to disembowel the Terran. Bill fought silently, driving a shattering blow to the open mouth with its gleaming fangs, with the other striving to keep it at arm's length. But the thing twisted with a sinuous motion and flung itself to one side, then leaped in again, driving like a tiger for the Terran legs, as Bill sprang to one side and then dived for the flashing creature.

Bill caught one of its legs and instantly it coiled back upon itself and fastened its fanged mouth upon his forearm. Only the invulnerable Beryllium mesh saved it from being fanged through; as it was, the awful pressure of those inhuman teeth was excruciating agony. In desperation Bill aimed another slashing blow at the maniacal face of the being, and saw it become indistinct with blood; using every ounce of strength at his command, the Earthman slowly forced back the face of the thing and with a convulsive movement shattered its vertebrae. When Bill released it, the creature dropped limp on the bloodied translucence of the Jadite flooring.

Reeling from fatigue, his body a mass of bruises, Bill methodically examined his attacker. It was about four feet tall, humanoid in shape, even as to features which were delicate—surprisingly beautiful in the repose of death. It had the face of a very beautiful woman in miniature. But there was nothing lovely about the competent taloned hands with their cording of steely muscles, or about the oddly shaped flexible feet—almost hands in themselves, like that of the now extinct apes of thousands of years back when Terra had been young. The body had evidently been evolved with a great simplicity of purpose—and, strangest of all, it was sexless!

And this was the thing that had been able to penetrate the defenses of his mind, almost succeeding in probing it without Bill being aware of it. In coordinating his findings, it occurred to Bill Nardon that this unholy creature was the nearest thing to a *homunculi* he had ever known! But

whence had it come? How correlate such a *mind of power* with such utterly ruthless, coldly calculating ferocity.

Bill shivered a little, and it was not altogether from his recent exertions in defense of his life. Stretched upon the exquisite whiteness of the plastic Jadite flooring, there was an infinitely appealing beauty to its face in the ultimate sleep, as if it were a welcome repose. The light brown eyes still open mirrored sadness—that was the incredible fact. The mind that had tipped the shores of his consciousness with sandals of foam, was still. But Bill Nardon's mind recovered from the horror of the unexpected attack, felt even more the icy chill of failure as it sought factors and only found an impenetrable mystery instead.

"No planet . . . no world known to me," and Bill had traveled half a galaxy in his time, "has spawned this creature. This," he paused, his eyes electric with excitement, "is a manufactured, an artificially evolved being! But who? Not the Martians surely; the Venusians? The Neptunians? No, no race in the entire six planets is capable of creating. . . ." In the very midst of his soliloquy he paused startled. "The Panadurs! Only they with their strange powers could achieve such a miracle . . . But would they? In all the annals of Europa there is no clue to the "Will to Conquer." Besides, to the Pandurs life was sacred . . ." His thoughts swirled feverishly, and, impenetrably, the mystery became more and more involved as the glittering assemblage of delegates from other worlds traveled to the great *Universarium*.

FOR A timeless moment of absolute silence, every being present stood with bowed head in reverence to the Absolute. Then they took their assigned places around the immense Council table grimly. The crisis was at hand.

When Bill Nardon entered, he was late, for the preliminaries, the usual diplomatic fencing and jockeying for favorable positions was over. The smoldering resentment of six belligerent worlds was frankly in the open.

Antaran, Head of the Supreme Council of Terra, presided at the head of the table—there had been no difficulty about that—

as was his due as Host; but Venus and Mars had been diplomatically seated at his right and left, respectively, facing each other and with equal honors, where they could glare at each to their hearts' content. Neptune had been given the other end of the table facing Antaran, and to his right the Amazonian leader from Mercury. The balance of the delegates had been scattered around the council table interspersed cleverly with members of Terra's Council.

Bill saw instantly Antaran's anxious frown as he entered and caught the half-annoyed, half-anxious query at his lateless, telepathed in their secret code. He merely signalled, "Wait, Antaran!" and proceeded to stand behind the Terran Leader's chair as unobtrusively as possible. But it *had* been an entrance! His stately height of six feet five inches, in the close fitting tunic of beryllium, the dark red mane of wavy hair falling to his shoulders, allied to the lateness of his coming, gave him an importance in the eyes of the visiting delegates which just now he would have liked to avoid.

But when Antaran arose, all eyes centered coldly upon the Council Leader. A sensuous fragrance of Venusian Jasmines wafted like an invisible presence as the Martian Leader insolently applied a gossamer handkerchief to his nostrils in defense of the odors of the other races, and the tiny, winged Venusian ambassador glared with scorn. The Amazonian being from Mercury clanked her power-rapier uneasily, while the tall Neptunian unconsciously touched his belt. Above them, the cathedral-like dome of the tremendous Hall of Planets rose until the graduating hues of its intricately carved Sapphirine plastic walls paled from translucent sapphire to aquamarine, to beryl to palest mauve, and then only the sheerest rose-gold or diffused sunlight where the intricate interlacing of arches was like a cob-web pattern in the distance.

"We are gathered here," Antaran began without preamble in his terse, icy voice, "to discuss a problem that threatens . . ." He paused as if not willing to voice the ghastly thought, "to plunge our Universe into suicidal strife, and engulf the magnificent fruits of inter-planetary civilization."

Bill Nardon while engaged in appraising

the reactions of those present, couldn't help being amused with part of his mind at the Terran Leader's purple periods. "Dearly loves speeches!" He exclaimed mentally in the curious mental short-hand with which he was wont to soliloquize.

"Ship after interplanetary ship has disappeared without trace somewhere in transit between the inner and outer planets. . . . That is," he amended, "the known outer planets which include uninhabited Jupiter and its uncolonized Moons, The great centers of civilization—Europa and Neptune. I cannot speak for Uranus which has only been partly explored, and those two unknown quantities, Pluto and especially Saturn, that planet of maddening contradictions on which no space vessel has been able to land. Thousands upon thousands of passengers, colonists of all races, and untold treasure has vanished into thin air, without trace. I submit," Antaran drew himself to his full skeletal height of over six feet, thin to the point of emaciation and austere in all the dignity of his two hundred years, "I submit that Terra is blameless—that the infamy of this outrage is surpassed only by the mystery of the purpose behind it all!" He stood grim and silent, with folded arms, his translucent gray eyes searching the faces before him.

And pandemonium broke loose! The Martian exquisite forgot his affected snobbishness and his perfumed handkerchief, and was shouting:

"The floor! Grant me the floor!"

While the blazing eyed virago from Mercury unceremoniously shoved the tall Neptunian aside and was bellowing in stentorian tones:

"I take the floor, Terran! I take the floor!"

ODDLY ENOUGH, it was the tiny Panadur from Europa who eventually got it. He had leaped upon the Council table and stood immobile, sending powerful telepathic vibrations in utter silence, for his race was voiceless. Before the incredible power of that involved mind, the Terrans, the surpassingly telepathic Venusians, even the Martians gave way. Only the Mercurian creature bellowed still, until Antaran granted the floor to the Panadur. And the telepathic flood poured

out. The being from Europa accounted for his world in no uncertain terms. To them life was sacred, and the last thing in the Universe they wanted was strife!

Planet after planet laid their cards on the table. Even Mars, for all their supercilious affectation, made a categorical denial. And as the mystery deepened, mutual suspicion flamed higher and higher. It was Venns that finally gave voice to what was in all their minds.

"After all, treasure is replaceable, great as the loss may be. But at least a dozen interplanetary spacers built of the invulnerable metal from Vulcan have disappeared! A few more of such Venusian ships, and whatever planet is responsible will have a respectable fleet of the most deadly ships of space known to our Universe! Our interplanetary treaty with Mars and Terra and Mercury gave us undisputed and undivided sovereignty over Vulcan Base and the invulnerable metal of its mines, because having in our grasp the conquest of Terra and Mars, we kept the peace! Now, after ages of adhering to the treaty, we are faced with virtual attack. We demand a solution!"

It was then that Bill decided it was high time to intervene. With a gesture he signalled to the outer arch of the Hall of Planets, while simultaneously he requested the floor. Antaran granted the request while a slight frown of puzzlement crinkled the pale, parchment-like brow crowned with snowy hair. And into the silent Hall came two ordine-plastic robots bearing between them a plastic box. They laid it on the floor, before the Council table and as silently withdrew. All eyes were centered on the plastic box, and the *personal* vibrations of the delegates were overpowering, as Bill strode calmly towards the box and wordlessly opened the lid.

With one effortless gesture he lifted the inert and stiffening form of the *homunculi* that had attacked him, and flung it into the center of the table. Even as they arose in amazement, he swept them with a bright, electric blue glare and with the unsuspected force of his tremendous mind-power he gave them a faithful, telepathic picture of what had occurred. They all saw it. The battle to the death; the creature's probing of his mind—*All!*

And there was no doubt as to its authen-

ticity, the proof was before their eyes, and no mind—not even Bill Nardon's—could possible fake such a harrowing experience and bring before them the *corpus delicti*, not even through telekinesis!

"That," Bill Nardon telepathed succinctly, "is a definite clue. I do not know of any race in our inter-planetary League able to *create* such a creature. I only have a suggestion to make. Once I was an explorer. I can be one again. Ordinary minds cannot cope with this problem. Terra will have to risk me if a solution to this mystery is to be achieved. I suggest a suicide expedition. If Mars, Venus, Neptune, Mercury and Europa will join Terra in sending a group of their best, their keenest minds, and their highest trained inter-planetary explorers, we may have a chance to relay back to the inhabited planets whatever we discover.

"I said *suicide* expedition—I meant just that. A single cruiser, armed by the combined science of all planets. Let Venus provide Vulcanite, because it's invulnerable; the atomic engines supplied by Terra—those are details. Every Ethero-Magnum Station between the inner and outer planets to be constantly on the alert—as far as Neptune!" His narrowed eyes swept them briefly, noting the instant negative reaction from the Venusian at the mention of Vulcanite. Suspicion lingered. Doubts rooted on a million incidents of the past—intrigues so involved as to drive a mind mad. Injustices. The last fratricidal war that had set their Universe aflame.

THE STATELY Martian had recovered his aplomb; the wisp of handkerchief he pressed to his nostrils as he eyed the inert creature asprawl on the table diffused a breath of fragrance, cool as a mountain breeze. He gestured toward it fastidiously, his violet eyes inscrutable.

"That . . . *homunculi*, or android . . . nothing mysterious about it. Superb byo-synthesis, I grant you, but Terra *could* produce it!" The last words were like a stab.

"And so *could* Mars," the Venusian said wearily in instant contradiction. "The point it, what could anyone of us hope to gain by war?" The word was out at last. The chill atmosphere of horror the appear-

ance of the *homunculi* had inspired, became icy, seemed to seep like the breath of death through the lofty Hall. In the silent pause their faces were like masks as the tiny Venusian eyed them with a sardonic glance. "Power, perhaps?" He continued. "No one planet wears the crown of empire—no one ever will as long as Venus holds Vulcan!" He said it softly, but with a Universe of power in his voice.

The sloe-eyed Amazon from Mercury stirred uneasily, and the Neptunian delegate seemed uncertain as to the next move. In silence, Bill Nardon waited patiently.

A swift glance of intelligence flashed between the rangy European Earthman and his inseparable Panadur companion. And then the latter rose. He held up a silver-furred arm perfectly moulded, and gestured with his oddly human but thumbless hand.

"This being could have easily traveled by spacer from whence it came—as easily as we did!" The Panadur telepathed. A small ship would be practically undetectable; besides, in view of our coming, even if seen it would have been taken for one of our ships. It occurs to me that this being may not have been created by another race, but *is in itself* the very danger we have to face!"

"No!" Bill Nardon exclaimed with utter conviction. "I caught it exploring my mind. In the instant that I contacted his, I *knew* it was not independent . . . it was *directed*. Three things only have I been unable to solve: It brought no weapons save its own murderous powers; it was purposely directed at me as if to destroy the only 'Correlating' mind in our League. And, most mysterious of all—in death, an ineffable sadness overlays its features, where the expression of bestial lust to kill should have been frozen in death." As Bill finished, the Martian delegate stood up:

"I suppose my Government would be willing to release the Multi-Energon Screen for this expedition—retaining its secret, of course—provided," he flared, "provided Venus releases the necessary Vulcanite for the hull!" They glared at each other from both sides of the Council Table in ominous silence.

The Panadur gazed at them with evident scorn. "Europa," he telepathed with

a curious sort of sardonic benignity, "would be quite willing to supply radiant energy bombs!" The nearest thing to a smile seemed to flit over his delicate features, as he noted their reaction to the dreaded reminder.

"And we will furnish plastics such as your worlds have never seen!" The man from Neptune spoke at last. The Amazon merely clanked her awful *Power-rapier* significantly.

II

"NO STRIKES YET!" Bill Nardon said softly, his eyes glued to the Electronoscope. "Sense anything, Frem!"

"Only an outflow of thought-energy . . . infinitely distant. . . I don't quite know, Nardon. It's voiceless . . . patternless, to me at least." The Panadur leader sounded uncertain. Even to his stupendous mind-power, the voiceless susurrations, alive, malignant, was a tenuous thing sensed more than felt, directionless, part of the vast, galactic night that engulfed the *bait ship* in blackness so velvety it was like smothering charred ash. The gigantic Super-spacer in the building of which six planets had tried to outdo each other, knifed through the impalpable vibrations in its endless flight. Back of it, a tiny smouldering disk, like a glowing ruby-brooch, nearly three-quarters of a billion miles away, was the sun.

Ahead, Saturn was slowly coming into position, and the great wings of light that were its rings shone with the glory of an eternal rainbow, paling the immense crystalline jewel that was Pluto.

The tension within the spacer mounted perceptibly. Yet interminably the hours dragged on and on. All screens were "down, save those for meteorite protection, as if deliberately inviting an attack. Every member of the heterogeneous crew knew their assigned tasks so that mechanically they would spring to their stations at the least warning.

Saturn grew immense, glorious beyond belief, until Bill Nardon was forced from the Electronoscope by the intolerable light. It was then that some one laughed. Rather, it was a cackling sound eerily in their midst.

Abruptly, Bill Nardon tensed, his pre-

ternatural faculties alert. He swung slowly from the eye piece of the 'scope and faced the emissaries—scientists-explorers all, of the six planets. It was the Neptunian who had laughed. He was shaking silently now, as if some hidden mirth convulsed him.

"We're close to the last planetary outpost," he observed, "and, nothing yet! This isn't an expedition, Nardon . . . it's a farce! What can you expect to find in Saturn? A frozen waste of solid, glassy hydrogen and helium, an infinite wilderness of 'hot-solid' gases under unimaginable pressure. You know Saturn has an atmosphere of at least twenty thousand miles in depth!"

"I know nothing of the kind," Bill answered evenly, with studied calm. "Saturn has never been properly 'correlated.' Liquids and solids don't compress; besides, even if Saturn were as you say a frozen waste with a temperature of say 180° C. below zero, that would still be too hot for hydrogen, which cannot exist as a liquid at that temperature. I needn't mention helium which requires a temperature lower still for liquefaction."

"You're leading us," the Neptunian hissed through clenched teeth, "into gales of methane and ammonia roaring around a dead world of frightful cold; into a frozen hell where if the atmosphere doesn't crush us, we'll never escape the overwhelming gravitational pull... You... you fiend." The last words were a shriek just as he launched himself in a tigerish leap straight for the throat of the Terran "Correlator."

And Bill sprang aside, his left hook instinctively catapulting to the unprotected chin of the Neptunian. But it failed to stop him. Off balance, slightly stunned by the blow, the maddened delegate from Neptune whirled on the Terran, aiming a staggering blow that whizzed past Bill's head with savage force. Off balance, the Neptunian staggered forward, his lean features contorted by bestial rage and the lust to kill. He was like a man possessed.

Bill Nardon was icy calm now. The harrowing training all members of the Explorer Class had to undergo, had come to the surface, and to the tall Terran everything had ceased to exist but the task at hand. He rolled aside slightly, sending a straight left to the Neptunian's head,

driving him off balance again. Bill weaved to and fro, lightly balanced on his toes as the Neptunian came boring back with terrible tenacity. Bill's right arm was a peg on which he hung the blows of the man from Neptune, while lashing like a cobra, his boxer's left, long and weaving, stabbed in again and again. The "Correlator" didn't want to kill the man. For here was another mystery. The attack was absurd, from the standpoint of their aims and goals. But he had no time to correlate the facts and arrive at a decision.

THE NEPTUNIAN rushed murderously eager, and Bill let his heels touch floor, refused to give way. He took a staggering blow to the midriff, and went pale from pain, but with the swiftness of a striking *Calamar*, he countered with a vicious left to the face and a slashing right cross. The Neptunian staggered uttering a hoarse cry as his features seemed to run like the quicksilver face of the Amazon from Mercury. He staggered and fell to the blood-spattered ordine plastic floor of the cruiser. Bill stood heaving, only now the answer was apparent to him, but again his thoughts were cut short, for the Neptunian was far from through. Into the ghastly face, a new expression of diabolical fury had appeared, and as he lurched to his feet, his right hand clawed at his belt for a weapon. Only power-rapiers had been allowed them individually until a landing was effected, and it was fortunate, for as the clawing fingers closed about the rapier's hilt, an unholy light came into the Neptunian's eyes.

Bill heard a thunderous battle-cry as a bulky shape sprang between him and the Neptunian, but he swept his rescuer aside. It was the Amazon, her own power-rapier drawn for battle.

"No interference!" he exclaimed in a voice as cold as outer space. His own blade was in his hand now, the flexible Columbium-steel activated by the dreadful electronic fire. The touch of that blade disintegrated flesh and bone and metal even. They were face to face now, confronting each other with the wary savagery of Venusian Ocelandians. The smell of death was in the air, and too, the wordless, tremendous, inarticulate vibration from an unknown source that seemed to hint at in-

conceivable horror, and ebbed and flowed about them. They could all sense it now, as it increased as if in a crescendo of triumph.

And at that instant the Neptunian struck. One moment they were circling for an opening, their ghastly weapons ready, and the next the singing blades met in midair as Bill Nardon parried the slashing blow. And then reason tottered as time stood still. Where the blades had been a flaring vortex of unendurable blue light sprang between them like a hellish fan of electronic fury opening before their eyes.

The Neptunian's blade had disappeared, consumed in the incredible holocaust; only the neutralized hilt of Vulcanite remained in his palsied hand as they reeled aside, blinded and unnerved. Bill's blade swished through the air as he reversed it and struck the Neptunian on the left temple with the Vulcanite hilt. The man's knees went rubbery and without a sound he slumped to the floor.

"The screen . . . throw on the Multi-Energon screen!" Bill bellowed. "This man was being *directed*, someone else may be next!" The powerful hum of the inner screen within the cruiser, that rendered everything within impervious to every known power, arose in the brief silence. And none too soon. Suddenly the cruiser lurched, and trembled like a great wounded stallion.

Bill had a confused picture of the addled members of several planets clinging to ultra-mullioned gravity seats as the ship began to spin. Every possible aid of science had been lavished on the cruiser, even to the most exacting provisions against physical injury, or the danger from an unexpected crash-landing in some far off world. But even their combined science, great as it was, had not foreseen the unpredictable enough to counteract this blow.

As if a cosmic hand had grasped the hurtling, spinning ship, it described an orbital parabola, flashing like a living thing through space, and headed at an unimaginable acceleration directly into the phantasmal light of the great winged world. Bill's dazzled eyes saw the tiny Panadur fight to strap himself to the acceleration seat on which he perched, while frantically

he strove to retain consciousness. Everything seemed ringed with prismatic rainbows from the awful glare of the electronic flash, as Bill resolutely set his conscious and sub-conscious mind in alignment to fight off oblivion. But nothing human could withstand consciously the orbital fall of the great ship, as it dived into the fathomless abyss of night in a concentric spiral that narrowed tighter and tighter, wheeling in direct ratio with the rotation of the mammoth planet, at which it was aimed like the spear of a cosmic angel.

Bill's last comforting thought was the Multi-Energon screen. Nothing, his superb mind conceived, could possibly penetrate that. A crash was imminent, he knew, but against that they were prepared. He tried to contact whatever it was that had sent the polygot vibrations and had managed to grip the Neptunian's brain, and only a confused disorder, as of many minds abandoning their temporary union came to him, and then . . . the profound illimitable darkness of complete oblivion.

NONE ABOARD saw the fantastic scene as the cruiser neared Saturn and was trapped by the hungry pull of the planet. None witnessed the macabre sight of stupendous mountains rising to impale them as they struck its atmosphere. Uncannily, the cruiser began to decelerate as the robot control went into action, activated by the atmospheric pressure. In a great swinging arc, the super-spacer settled lower and lower, until at last, immense lateral fins shot out of its sides, and secondary rockets belched forth, braking the headlong rush.

Beneath them, a world of light and shadows shimmered under the unearthly loveliness of the great rings, as if illuminated by a sidereal current of glowing jewels. Three of the nine moons were in transit, phantasmal in their silent loveliness as they hovered over the parent world. Beneath, the liquid sparkle of an unknown ocean undulated softly, twinkling with myriad star points as if spangled with stardust.

At last the interplanetary cruiser came to rest, ploughing up immense furrows in the glittering sands of the shore, in a partial crash-landing. The robot controls, magnetically activated to decelerate in

direct ratio with the proximity of land, had held true. The almost incandescent tertiary-outer hull of the ship, began to cool to a dull silvery hue. In the near distance, a glorious city of towering spires and prismatic domes, was like a fairy scene on a colossal scale. But no fingers of light issued from its towers and domes. No living beings issued from its portals to investigate the arrival of these voyagers of space.

Only the querulous susurrations of the spumeless waves of the great shining sea disturbed the eternal silence of Saturn. The silence of a dead world had enveloped the Terran ship, even as within it, the unconscious members of its heterogeneous crew were wrapped in the silence of oblivion.

The wheeling moons, one blue, one palest amber, and one, the largest like a glowing ruby of the skies, passed on, while time marched on in its endless cavalcade.

BILL GASPED in a spasm of living torture as consciousness returned in a flood. Slowly he opened long blue eyes that were tragic with pain, and surveyed the inert forms all about him in the great control cabin of the ship. To one side, the partly crushed form of the Neptunian delegate sprawled abnormally twisted. Bill knew instantly the man was dead, and a flicker of sorrow touched his eyes. There had been no time to strap him to an acceleration chair. It was their first casualty. To his right a slight movement betrayed returning life to the Amazonian being from tiny Mercury. The woman, if she could be termed that, moaned unconsciously and then opened her coal black eyes with a stupefied look. They widened as comprehension came. The great cruiser was at rest, and through the visiports flooded the jewelled illumination of Saturn's rings. An indistinct croak issued from her throat, and was echoed by the "Ahh" of excruciating pain as the fastidious Martian also came to. With an effort, Bill Nardon unstrapped himself and rose unsteadily, flexing cramped muscles that shrieked exquisite torture at every movement he made. But he managed to reach the emergency cabinet and extract a priceless Neptunian flask of Jadite, jewelled with Sapphirines. He opened and satisfied himself that it was

filled with *Sulfalixir*, then ministered to their needs. The miraculous stimulant was like a draught of life-essence to them. Not until then, did he ascend to the observation dome. The sight that greeted his eyes was to remain as long as he lived a memorable experience.

Behind him trooped the others, to stand in awe at the spectacle before them. "Saturn!" Bill Nardon breathed. "For countless ages unvisited by man . . . and yet, a habitable world!" In the distance, the shimmering city glowed with a thousand hues under the illumination of the rings, silent, aloof.

"Cut multiple screen briefly and obtain atmospheric samples," Bill Nardon broke the spell. "I'll want everyone wearing Energon helmets for the interval while the screen's off."

He gestured to the assembled scientists, coldly efficient. The breathless moment of matchless thrill was over. The winged Venusian left immediately on his way to the Geology lab, while the Martian followed to make atmospheric tests. The Neptunian scientist in charge of chemistry was dead, so Bill sent a Terran subordinate in his stead. At last only the Panadur whose task was psycho-synthesis due to his abnormal telepathic sensitiveness remained with Bill, who besides being Commander, had the arduous task of correlating findings.

"We've landed *alive*! That is the incredible fact," the Panadur flashed. "And now that we're here, it seems our enemy—whatever it is, has changed its plans. At least, I sense no peril."

"Here," Bill replied mentally, handing the silvery creature a flexible crysto-plast helmet powered by the Energon principle, "Don your helmet. The screen is being cut, and we can't risk any more *seizures*." He paused while he adjusted his own helmet, then went on: "If we are alive, we have the multiple-energon screen to thank," he said slowly. "Whatever seized us in space meant to end our journey right then and there. Remember the man from Neptune!"

"That city is human . . . I sense it!" The Panadur telepathed, as the impenetrable barrier of the screen was cut off. "Odd, the vibration is low, almost imperceptible,

where it should be tremendous if it's inhabited!"

"We're plagued by mysteries!" Bill replied exasperated. "Well, next thing's to vibrate the news to Europa and Neptune via Astro-Magnum. . . . Hope it hasn't been damaged—no Ethero-Magnum could bridge the distance to the nearest planets!"

But Freml, the Panadur, wasn't listening even with part of his mind; the great shining city in the near distance seemed to have a hypnotic fascination for him. Slowly he took off the Energon screen helmet, and seemed to concentrate its mental power into its highest apex of ultra-sensitivity. At last it turned its glaucous beryl eyes on Bill Nardon, shining with a great excitement, and poured a telepathic stream:

"There is life in that city . . . an ocean of life! But it's not active . . . it's dormant, submerged . . . helpless!" The Panadur seemed to grope for qualifying adjectives; impatiently it went on: "But *there is one* that is not dormant, and it is a mind of power!"

Into their midst the Martian scientist raced with a wild look in his eyes.

THE ATMOSPHERE . . . Commander . . . it can't be! It's a hydrogen, oxygen compound stabilized by an unknown gas that has properties of living energy . . . there's nothing like it in our known universe . . . it's like a sentient thing!"

"Is it breathable?" Bill's laconic query. "Yes, exhilarating even . . . but I have yet to test for secondary metabolic effects . . . I . . . for once in my existence I was too excited to complete the tests!" The Martian scientist was abashed. "It has one remarkable property, though, its vibratory conductivity exceeds that of water many times, not to speak of air."

"That will aid us in sending by Astro-Magnum," Bill thought instantly, and their attuned minds received the message. "Astro-radio will receive an impetus in its passage through this atmosphere we had not counted on!"

And something else they had not counted on was advancing toward them like a vast curtain of scintillating light. It was Bill who saw it first, covering half of the vast horizon, terrible in the unearthly beauty

of its swirling vortices of prismatic stars.

In a prodigious leap Bill Nardon was at the conveyor that slid noiselessly into the control room, in those few dreadful seconds, it seemed to him he would never have time to reach the control board as he raced with extinction. When his hand closed over the switch that activated the outer Multi-Energon Screen, a wave of nausea swept him from the intensity of the reaction.

And without warning the starry swarm struck. Like billions of miniature stars exploding, the ship was enveloped in coruscating flame, lurid, unbearable in the dazzling glare of the holocaust, until even Bill Nardon doubted if the mathematically perfect Energon Screen providing an infinite overlapping series, would hold. Beneath was the invulnerable hull of Vulcanite, he knew. But would even Vulcanite be impervious to this bombardment once the screen gave way?

"All scientists at emergency stations!" He barked as he telepathed at the same time. "Battle crews man all weapons and hold fire pending orders. Everyone wear helmets!"

HE, HIMSELF took over the Electro-Flash, Neptune's gift to the Expedition. In a way, it was the ultimate weapon, disrupting as it did the very electronic balances of organic and inorganic matter.

And then, as abruptly as it had come, the terrible grandeur of the living curtain was withdrawn, receding into the far distance like a vast nebula of microscopic stars.

Bill shook himself. This must be telekenesis, a nightmare instilled into their minds, it couldn't be real! But the white-faced Venusian that fluttered in, flashing incoherent messages as he tried to telepath, dispelled that thought.

"Commander . . . I have checked the graph of power intake of automatic absorber P-6, set to absorb cosmic rays for auxiliary power . . . I . . ." He passed a tiny, weary hand over his smooth brow, and his azure wings hung limp, "I can't believe it . . . we have more power, *more atomic power* than when we began this trip! It is as if we had tapped an incredible source of radio-active energy!"

Silently, a Terran scientist handed Nardon a developed electro-photo of a small

segment of the "curtain" of fire. Unmistakably outlined were myriad tiny insect bodies, unquestionably composed of some living radio-active substance.

"The Absolute be praised!" Bill breathed fervently. "No known ship—not even Vulcanite could possibly withstand a radio-active bombardment of such scope!" He turned slowly to where the Martian scientists stood silent in a group. "I salute you," he telepathed gravely. "Your Multi-Energon screen is the greatest defensive weapon in our Universe." Embarrassedly, the tall, violet-eyed Martians stirred uncomfortably; they had a deep distaste for any emotions and suppressed them ruthlessly. Other findings began to trickle in. The nameless inter-stellar spacer that had emerged from the combined ingenuity of half a dozen worlds, spurred by the ultimate incentive of a brooding and catastrophic peril, all the more terrible because it was unknown, literally swarmed with specialists in every known science. It remained for the special mind of Bill Nardon to correlate all the scientific details and weld them into a final complete knowledge, behind which it was his task to find and solve the *primum mobile*—the motivating factor that they sought.

One thing emerged beyond the shadow of a doubt. Each attack had been characterized by a complete absence of a known *presence*. The individual attempt on Bill's life on earth had been carried out by a creature acting outside its own volition; the magnetic force that had drawn their ship into Saturn itself, likewise was disembodied, and now this radio-active swarm that would have consumed them but for the Energon screen—it too gave no clue as to the final, directing intelligence behind. And yet, in their very midst, a great scientific mind had gone mad.

The stalemate was clear. Thus far they had weathered the unimaginable behind their Energon Screen. But they were trapped within just as effectively as long as they were unable to emerge. The sum total of their knowledge resolved itself to a series of bizarre incidents—to which it might be added the cryptic thought-projection of Freml, the Panadur. He had mentioned "*an ocean of submerged life . . . helpless*" had been his final description. Yet he had also indicated a "Mind of

Power" far from helpless or submerged indeed. And great as it might be, *one single entity* was, foe or not, worthy of challenge. The incomplete puzzle in Bill Nardon's mind revolved with all the maddening quality of a picture almost discerned, yet eluding the final composition that would give it recognizable form.

The question was, should they correlate all findings and attempt a return to Earth, and utilize their meager knowledge in preparation of some sort of a defense. Or, take the final risk and visit that silent city whence Freml had drawn vibrations of intelligent life. Bill Nardon already knew what his decision would be. He would call a conference, of course, but in his mind the determination to confront whatever that 'Mind of Power' was—*alone*, had already crystallized.

And in another mind, alien beyond belief, in comparison with his, the same idea had taken root. For Freml, the Panadur, had not told Bill Nardon all he had obtained in that last mental projection of his. A deep, inhuman horror had traveled the incredibly-faint thought waves. Something ancient beyond calculation, as if the essence of evil itself had come alive, had bridged the gap.

III

"I SEE NO wisdom in risking your life too. For if I perish, my task falls upon your shoulders, Freml. In that emergency, you were selected to command the ship . . . remember?"

Voicelessly the Panadur assented, and continued to patter softly beside Bill Nardon.

"I've brought with me the League's ultimate weapons," the red-headed Terran continued. "Electro-flash, power-rapier . . . if those were to fail, what use would there be in attempting to remain? Thus, I would make a suggestion—return to the spacer in the Z-auxiliary that brought us to the city; I'll keep in touch with you through the ethero-radio," he lifted his left arm exposing the watch-like instrument on his wrist.

The Panadur lifted his great beryl eyes to the tall Terran and telepathed softly, "You don't expect me to agree to that!"

"No," Bill smiled, "it was the expression of a hope. But tell me this, if as I expect, there's strife, what can you hope to add in my favor that would be as important as your being safe in the ship, were I to die?"

Freml didn't answer right away. It was not hesitation, Bill knew that, but the Panadur had blanked his mind. There were things they didn't impart whenever they touched on secrets of his race. Then—

"A weapon *you* do not have!" He seemed to consider the next thought before he telepathed:

"You know my race can store the accumulative power of radiant energy, and *direct* it at will . . . It's in the legends . . . that's how we saved the first Earthmen who trod Europa."

They were in the very heart of the silent city now, and the lofty domes and exaggerated spires swam in the glaucous dusk that was Saturn's eternal day. Overhead great stars blazed like flaming roses, and the glory of the rings was a spangled ocean of glowing jewels, shimmering in patternless rhythms of color. Their sense of reality drained away as the full impact of its dissolving magic gripped their minds.

At last they stood before the portals of the great building whose lofty tower was the city's dominant note. For here the vibrations had led them, vibrations of life—dormant, helpless—and something else too.

Their senses preternaturally alert weapons ready, they exchanged one final look, then Bill Nardon pushed the great portal before him, and it swung silently inwards. And then the great stars, the wheeling moons, the glorious rings that poured down enchantment, were forgotten before the sight that gripped them as they stepped inside. For on an infinite series of tiers that filled the lofty immensity of the room lay inert beings.

Row upon endless row of creatures that to all appearances could have been highly evolved Terrans, except for an exaggerated refinement of features, an evident fragility of bodies, as if evolved almost to the very brink of decadence. Their marble flesh had the cold whiteness of death, and their hair had grown until it spread in great festoons of yellow and black and silver grey. A fine, glittering

film of dust overlay their tunics and flesh, and over all, the impalpable feeling of disaster, of a gigantic tragedy, hung like a pall.

"Cataleptic!" Freml flashed the thought, as he examined the nearest beings. "A living death!"

"Rather," Bill Nardon said slowly, "a deathless sleep!" It occurred to him that the entire city was thus peopled with sleepers in oblivion—the ocean of submerged life Freml had sensed.

UPWARD through the broad ramps of a now motionless conveyor they ascended floor after floor, filled to overflowing with inert Saturnians, until at last the conveyor ceased and only the polished walls of some unknown substance of what appeared to be an ascensor, remained. Nardon examined it carefully before pressing the colored disk on the side of its closed door. Noiselessly the panel slid aside revealing a shining quadrangle. Unhesitatingly they entered and the door automatically closed. A series of vari-colored disks made a triangular pattern on the left, and Bill pressed the black one at its apex. It shot upwards swiftly without the slightest jar, its incomparable smoothness gave no hint of the extraordinary speed save for the slight, hollow feeling in the pit of their stomachs its occupants felt. After a brief interval it stopped, decelerating as smoothly as it had begun, and the sliding door swept aside. And before them opened a great, transparent alcove beyond whose translucent walls and ceiling, the colossal theatricalism of the heavens was visible.

But Bill Nardon and the Panadur had no eyes for the sidereal spectacle above, two figures in the foreground held their eyes. A girl and what was evidently a man. Two figures, no more. And just now there was not the faintest hint of a belligerent move. Somehow the sight of that girl seated immobile with her exquisite hands folded on her lap, and the startling peacefulness of the man at the towering instrument he was playing, had a curious anticlimatic effect on Bill. He had not known what to expect—but surely, not this!

"Beware!" came the Panadur's warning with unusual force, as they advanced at

the ready into the center of the alcove.

The man at the instrument ceased playing, and calmly, casually almost, leaned over to the silent girl and kissed her softly upon the lips, brushing the flower-like mouth with a fleeting caress. And before their uncomprehending eyes, a spectral-blue flash lit the alcove with its ghastly glare, as their lips met! Instantly, the girl's marvelously tinted flesh, like Venusian nacre superimposed on gold, with the highlights gleaming through, *paled* to the translucent whiteness of Jadite.

For she was golden—her eyes, her hair, the extraordinary lashes that gleamed with the age-old patina of ancient gold. Only her cold, remote serenity was as if she were enveloped in an invisible icy sheath. There was no hint of feeling, of emotional force even . . . until Bill gazed into her eyes and saw the infinite depths of tragedy. As they stood transfixed, she stirred a little and said in a low, magnificent voice:

"I am Margalida, the *Aurean*, transmitting for my Lord. If you prefer, I shall telepath." Her deep contralto was glorious in itself, but she spoke as impersonally, as *neutral*, even, as if she were a mechanical instrument, nothing more. And had they known, it could not be otherwise, for her task was to serve only as an instrument of transmission for the telepathic vibrations of the creature at the instrument. Hers was a conquered race, a race sunk in cataleptic oblivion, and she no longer had a will. Her double usefulness made her life secure, for the time being. For the Cinnabarian whom she termed her "Lord" in keeping with the custom of his race, chose, to communicate only through the medium of an enslaved mind. Never, never directly, so that the telepathic vibrations of alien races had to pass through the spectrum of the captive brain and be rendered harmless. The Cinnabarians emitted directly, but received only through the subject being.

"The incredible effrontery of it!" Bill Nardon flashed to the Panadur. "Has *his* mind protected against our thoughts, and will only communicate through this tragic being!" Bill's lips curled in a grimace of contempt, revealing a row of dazzling, even teeth. "With such a mind of power, this . . . Vampire of Life Force . . . elects to communicate with us indirectly only!

Maybe he fears he might be contaminated . . . the colossal effrontery!"

"*He's absorbing everything we're thinking,*" Freml thought coldly. For some minutes now, he had been enaged in "*Brooding,*" the nearest term Earth had for the Panadur process of concentrating their energy potential, raising it to its ultimate power. His exquisite, silvery fur was an angry silver-violet now, and the beryl eyes were brilliant like faceted jewels.

"I am Kleg," the telepathic vibration came winging from the man, and even before the girl transmitted, both Bill and Freml had received the message. "The divine overlords of *Danae* have permitted your invasion. . . . If you and your companions would live, you must place yourselves and your vessel at our disposal." He was playing again, the music weaving an unearthly spell in muted minors; it rose and sank in a shower of notes that sped like living, winged things under his caressing touch. Only it was an instrument on which no human being could ever hope to play, for Kleg had four flexible arms, and slender, tendril-like fingers on his four narrow hands that flashed with vertiginous rapidity, as he probed deliberately with the unholy scalpel of his satanic music the emotional depths of the Terran and the Panadur.

"Rot! Permitted indeed! You dragged us here with some magnetic device. Tell your vampiric overlords, we acknowledge only One Divinity—the Absolute." Bill's eyes were barely open, mere electric-blue lines above his high cheek bones, while in his right hand he held the deadly Power-rapier, and an electronic-flash in the other.

Kleg turned slightly from the piano-like instrument, with its three separate keyboards, with a curiously fastidious motion, and on the strange thin face with its knife-like nose and chill, transparent eyes the barest semblance of a smile parted slightly the cruel curve of the faintly outlined lips. He let his four flexible arms with their slim hands and long, sensitive thumbs fall from the keyboards of the instrument, and rose to his towering height of over seven feet in one sinuous motion of faultless elegance. His exaggerated slenderness made Bill's superb physique seem primitive—barbaric.

SUDDENLY the Cinnabarian's transparent eyes went black and without warning a coruscating lance of living energy shot from his lips. But in the infinitesimal fraction of time, Freml, the Panadur, had acted. The awful energy potential he'd been generating in the involved processes of his being flashed like a thunderbolt of power and met the Cinnabarian's in mid air. A hellish flare of incandescence blinded them as the universe seemed to explode before their eyes. Reeling apart with dazzled eyes, they sensed the emergence of a new foe, and Bill's power rapier wove a vortex of electronic disintegration as he twirled it before himself and the Panadur; after a while, although their sight was ringed with a myriad rainbows and prismatic rings, they could see several ape-like *homunculi* at bay, darting before them, seeking an opening whence they might reach the Terran and the Panadur. The Cinnabarian stood back, leaning against the immense instrument, limp and deathly white, as if drained of energy, which indeed he was. He eyed the *Aurean* girl hungrily, but Bill was between him and the helpless slave.

In a frenzy of fury, one of the *homunculi* made a wild leap, and impaled itself on the flashing blade. The sickening odor of disintegrating flesh and bone was a stench in their nostrils as the creature fell cloven to the floor.

Bill Nardon was mercilessly using the electro-flash on the taloned creatures now, as they redoubled their efforts to reach them. As several died, others rushed in, debouching from the ascensor, slithering from under the instrument, until the carnage was appalling. At last, Bill's electro-flash went dead. He had no time to recharge, but drew the less efficient and thunderous atomo-pistol from his belt, and aiming it at the foremost *homunculi* pulled the trigger. A starkly curious thing instantly happened even before the last roaring echoes of the discharge had dwindled.

The tall Cinnabarian with an involuntary shriek of mortal pain doubled over, much like warriors on Terra had doubled up and died when a dreadful Radite bomb fell too near and the devastating concussion snuffed out their lives. The vibrations of the atomo-pistol had killed him,

although the tall being from outer-space was untouched. And over the embattled *homunculi's* faces a curious change came, as their eyes seemed to go blank, and they stood uncertain, bewildered, making no effort to attack. With one swift motion of his powerful arm, Bill gathered the unconscious form of the *Aurean* girl and retreated to the ascensor followed by the Panadur. Unheeded, the ethero-radio on his wrist flashed red and blue, as the others back in the spacer tried to communicate with them. They had heard what had happened in an incoherent fashion, but had no way of knowing the story in full.

"We've got them now!" Bill exulted, as he raced down the ramps once they'd left the ascensor. "We've got them, Freml!"

"Beware!" the Panadur flashed again. "They never suspected we of Europa possessed *their* power. I sensed from the moment I saw that kiss, that Kleg would strike in that fashion—only, he drained himself in his eagerness to blast us. The next time *they* will be more careful!"

"The next time I'll do my communicating with electro-cannon!" Bill exclaimed. "Although just where are the rest of those hellions? What Kleg was doing alone in the tower's a mystery to me."

They got into the swift Z-Auxiliary and started the return journey to the spacer, under the lambent fires of the titanic rings. And now the *Aurean* girl trembled and became convulsed on the seat of the auxiliary where Bill had placed her. "They're trying to reach her, no doubt—from wherever they are . . . damn them!" Bill flamed. He took off his own transparent Energon helmet and fastened it on the unconscious girl. He was gratified as the convulsions ceased.

A MEASURE of color had returned to her wan features and her heart was beating with greater strength. Bill thought of administering the restorative *Sulfalixir*, but he dared not risk removing the Energon screen headpiece. Freml, the Panadur, caught his urgent thoughts, drained of life energy to the point of exhaustion, Margalida might not survive. And she must live, *she must!* Was Bill's intense thought. Behind that alabastrine brow lay the knowledge of a thousand mysteries that must be cleared up.

"I will aid her," Freml telepathed with a tired sigh. He went close to the girl, and his fragile hand stroked her throat, then quietly he placed his face close to the faltering heart and transmitted some of the precious energy that still remained to him. Slowly, imperceptibly at first, the exquisite bosom beneath the tunic of a material sheer as dim blue fog, began to rise and fall with regularity. Into the exquisite face, the delicate nacre hue with gold highlights crept slowly. Not until then did Freml rise. "Danger's past," he telepathed laconically. "Hurry, Bill! I shall need to borrow energy from my people . . . soon!"

And indeed there was a need for haste, for at last the hidden enemy had decided to strike in person. All else had failed despite machiavellian plans. This time they meant to stamp out of existence these presumptuous creatures that had blasted one of their kind—an overlord. Besides in the unconscious mind of the *Aurean* girl, their hellish secrets lay.

Out of the foamless waves of the strangely shining sea, immense iridescent globes floated upwards swiftly, gaining altitude and then deploying into a triangular formation like an inverted pyramid.

It was an awesome sight. In a frenzy for foreboding, Bill gave the Z-Auxiliary its maximum acceleration. He knew it was a race with time, and time was on the wing. Ahead of them the super-spacer loomed glistening in the fantastic light, and short as the distance was, it seemed as if they would never make it in the face of that swooping formation of menacing globes. Out of the foremost sphere, a lengthening finger of livid fire pointed directly at their tiny, hurtling craft.

Bill Nardon maneuvered in a wide zig-zag then aimed for the yawning auxiliary lock of the Spacer, and hurtled within to a jarring, crashing stop in the mesh of synchronized magnetic fields that achieved degeneration, arresting mass and speed synchronously. The huge lock clanged shut instantly, and with what breath remained in his battered body, Bill Nardon managed to shout into the communication system:

"Inner and outer Energon screens . . ." he gasped. "Man all emergency and battle stations. . . . Prepare to launch, we're

going up!" Blood was seeping a scarlet thread out of his ears and nose. Freml, the Panadur, was a limp heap on the auxiliary's floor, as energy drained, the sudden acceleration had blanked out even his stupendous mind.

Bill pressed the exit lever of the Auxiliary and got up stiff and weary, his body a living ache. And even before he got to the exit, Nydron was there, inscrutable as usual, product of several races from the wild days of the last interplanetary war, until it was doubtful if he himself knew his antecedents, or his age, for that matter. But Terra counted only on achievement—not racial purity. They had at last learned that much, and Nydron's military genius was . . . well, Nydron's. He was bowing slightly now, and behind him Bill discerned the *Juvenals*, who under the direction of a Juvenal Surgeon, repaired bodies through a rejuvenating therapy that involved an extremely delicate sub-glandular technique.

Bill waved to them to take charge of Freml and the *Aurean* girl, and wished he himself could afford the luxury of sinking into the ineffably peaceful, dreamless sleep which was the first step in the process; but no time for that now. He glanced at the light-copper features of Nydron, that might be a modified-Martian, with a dash of Mercury thrown in.

"I see our military expert is ready for all contingencies!" He strove to be light, casual almost. "Have your forces been instructed, Nydron? I mean . . . to meet this unexpected attack?"

"All screens are on, Commander. As per your orders we're blasting off in seconds. I shall modify strategy and technique according to what information you may give me." The long, lambent green eyes of the man widened briefly illuminating the smooth, narrow face which though unlined gave the feeling of incredible age. "As you doubtlessly know, any enemy has a weak link in the chain—an . . . an . . ."

"Achilles heel?" Bill's eyes flicked with humor.

Nydron assented with the barest flicker. Everything about him seemed outwardly static, thanks to his amazing economy of movement.

"Any luck with the Astro-radio during my absence?" Bill asked as they hurried

from the Auxiliary into the control room of the Spacer. If they could only contact even one of the inhabited outer planets!

"We've been sending steadily. No response!" Nydron replied laconically. A convulsive tremor shook the titanic spacer, and the shrill ascending whine of the warning signal rose to inaudibility.

Overhead the inverted pyramid of scintillating globes seemed about to engulf the throbbing ship.

"PEACE, gentlemen!" Antaran's voice floated cool and sardonic beneath the lofty transepts of the Hall of Planets in the Universarium.

"Your charges are . . . well, ancient history—almost . . ."

"Of course Terra sent part of its fleet following the departure of the *Expedition*. But would you have had it otherwise? It was not only a measure of protection for our most unique mind—Nardon's—but you must admit, protection also for the other occupants of the spacer." It was exasperating, maddening, that admirable self-possession with a hint of laughter.

"How do we know *that* was the sole purpose of your fleet?" Flushed, his magnificent tunic dishevelled, the Martian Ambassador asked furiously.

"You invite reprisals!" A Neptunian was saying. "War Fleets are banned from space except by unanimous consent—you've broken the law! Or is it that you're scrapping the Treaty already?" He glared at the Head of the Terran Council belligerently, and with the complete approval of half a dozen races.

"No laws have been broken . . . *Gentlemen*." He emphasized the term. "You see, we're all party to the deed. Really now, don't tell me you were not aware that Mars, Venus, Neptune . . . Mercury even, in fact, every signatory to the Inter-Planetary League made instant preparations the moment the 'Suicide' Spacer blasted off. Why, there wasn't a planet but had its fleet in readiness to follow!"

Antaran smiled sweetly into their embarrassed faces.

"Admitted," the Martian said stiffly, "but those were merely pardonable precautions!"

"Precautions that became immediate action as soon as our fleet segment was dis-

covered in space!" Antaran's voice went cold. "Like a comet dragging a lengthening tail, each planet we passed sent out part of its fleet, until *all of us* were represented. Haven't your Governments advised you . . . Gentlemen?"

Smiling still, although inwardly disgusted at the eternal suspicion of the various worlds, he slowly drew an Astrograph from his tunic, silencing them as their suspicious curiosity was aroused.

"As I already hinted," he said affably, "I'm afraid all of you are slightly behind the times. Let me read you this message from . . . *your planet, Vermil!*" Antaran nodded to the Neptunian Diplomat. "It's a message via Ethero-radio sent us copied from the original Astrograph Neptune received from outer space:

"Combined Fleet reports sighting Spacer enter Saturn's atmosphere. Mathematics of orbital maneuver computed. Will correlate to attempt duplication. Astro-radio messages from Spacer indicate planet inhabited."

Electrified, their faces ludicrous, they stood before the white-haired leader in silence.

"Everyone of our Governments is now aware of this." Antaran said in kindly tones. "We've had to maintain the utmost secrecy, for if the billions that people the various worlds had learned what we were up against, there would have been panics, upheavals . . . it would have been the signal for inimical minds among the '*have-nots*' to attempt the age-old cycle. Remember, Gentlemen . . . excepting the Panadurs," he gazed with veiled admiration at the Ambassador of that mysterious race, "none of the rest of us have lost their Will to Battle . . . which perhaps," he added as an after-thought, with a sort of brooding amusement, "is just as well!"

They were still dazed, as the tremendous implications of Antaran's words filled their minds.

A new planet had been added to their group. A new world had come into being. '*Inhabited*,' the Astrograph had read! And it was a fabulous world next in size only to Jupiter and the Sun. It would revolutionize their economy, possibly add illimitable riches in raw materials and . . . But their minds were too filled with the staggering prospects to visualize just now

the stupefying reality of what it meant to open up Saturn.

All belligerence was forgotten. Each emissary from the various worlds had withdrawn into his individual shell, lest the thundering ideas that swirled in their minds become common property.

The eternal game for favored position would begin soon, Antaran knew, yet Saturn was still an *unknown* quantity. Opening a new world was far from being as easy as that. Perhaps all their fleets might never return, and other expeditions would have to go forth. He sighed a little. And it occurred to him that perhaps he was getting old.

IV

"**HURRY THEM!**" Bill's thoughts crackled at the Martian expert in charge of ordnance. "I want no refinements—give me good, old fashioned atomocannon with the greatest possible concussion. Power them to emit shattering volumes of sound upon discharge!"

The Martian's violet eyes widened. "A complete reversal of all trends, Commander!" he exclaimed mentally. "But it shall be done immediately." He withdrew slightly mystified.

An intolerable net of violet fire enveloped the Spacer, as the maneuvering globes enlarged the pyramid to avoid the upward rush of the great ship. Up, and up the flashing cruiser sped through the screaming air, and the enveloping net of rays from the alien globes. And suddenly it levelled off and belched its answer. From myriad hidden points, huge dark masses catapulted into space, as the spacer instantly rose above them in a burst of acceleration.

With frightful accuracy, the ghostly fingers of livid fire that criss-crossed the violet net, swung from the globes to meet this new menace before it could shower among them, and the dark masses exploded into a holocaust of sound that sped through the riven air at the frightful speeds Saturn's atmosphere induced. Like leaves in a great wind the fiery globes tossed and whirled, breaking formation. But again they reformed, maintaining the pyramid with mathematical precision, and the ghostly, violet web of intolerable power

deepened, intensified until it was a glowing amethyst hue, and the spears of livid fire probed like cosmic lances at the frantically maneuvering spacer.

"The Multi-Energon Screen's a blessing, Commander—how long we shall be able to enjoy it, is the problem," Nydron observed drily. "I'm convinced this is a battle where logistics have no value."

Bill Nardon's features went taut. The calmer Nydron appeared, the greater the nature of the crisis. He favored his military expert with a long, searching glance. Into the pause, the Martian Aide's thoughts intruded anxiously:

"Surely, the Energon screen's not faltering!" It was unthinkable.

"No, but at the rate it's consuming energy in warding off that electronic barrage, it's but a question of time until we're left with a mechanical and mathematically perfect screen dead from lack of power!"

"And, you had in mind, Nydron . . . ?" Bill was aware the great military expert had something to propose. Only, Nydron's strategy was never orthodox, and quite often overwhelming.

Nydron shrugged his shoulders and inhaled deeply of a pungent Venusian cigarette. "We've reached a stalemate. Those fiends out there," he gestured towards the Globes, "can't penetrate our screen, but they can detonate our strato-bombs at will. The question is, which source of power will last longer, theirs or ours!" He paused, and puffed again.

"Every soldier knows death's to be expected sooner or later—it's part of our creed. But you've brought a shipful of master minds, doubtless of irreplaceable value to the Inter-Planetary League. Now, if these were purely a military expedition . . ." He left the rest unsaid.

"In that event, what would you do?" Bill strove to be as patient as he could, for Nydron was allowing only those thoughts he wanted, to trickle through.

"Employ the sub-atomic Dispersal Beam to penetrate their defensive screen, pick off individual Globes and launch radiant energy bombs as close as possible, and see if that doesn't take care of their . . . what you termed their Achilles Heel. Of course," he murmured softly, "that *might hasten our end*, by using up our reserves of power all the sooner."

"Sub-atomic dispersal beam!" the Martian went stiff. "Why, that might be an Energon neutralized . . . you mean to say that Terra . . .!"

"Naturally." Nydron seemed to be enjoying himself. "What else could it be? You didn't think Terra was going to remain wholly helpless? Every poison has an antidote. However, it has not been tried as yet."

It was as brilliant and ruthlessly simple a plan, as only Nydron's mind could conceive.

FROM WHAT Bill Nardon had witnessed in the silent city's tower, he had correlated the Cinnabarian's hypersensitivity to vibration. The strange being had died from the concussion of the atomo-pistol. No wonder they even filtered mental vibrations through a docile, captive mind before they permitted the telephated messages to reach them. Bill had demanded atomo-cannon with intensified detonative power, but this—this plan to strip them of their protective screen and spray them with radiant energy bombs which continued to detonate until the last minute spark was released—if it worked, it was the answer to their problem. The danger was very great, Bill knew. But in seconds he weighed the involved factors, and found only one definitive answer. He gave it.

"Nydron," Bill said formally. "You're in absolute military charge of strategy, answerable to no one—not even to me! Your plan should make history. Every scientific mind on this ship, is at your disposal if needed. I told you which was their weakest link. . . . I think you've found the answer. While you give the necessary orders, I'm going to visit the clinic. The Juvenalian treatment should by now permit my questioning the *Aurean* girl safely. There are a few points not quite clear in my mind," he smiled. "It would be a dreadful thing to die and never know the complete answer to this mystery."

But Nydron was not interested in mysteries. His lambent eyes glowed with inner fires, as he bowed in the ceremonial manner to the Scientist-in-Chief, who had placed absolute command in his hands.

If there were the barest chance of victory, he would seize it. He knew that regardless of the outcome, the immortality

of his name was assured, but if he won, this would be a victory unparalleled in the annals of their worlds. "It is a great honor, Commander," he said simply. "The greatest I have known. The Absolute willing, we shall win!"

Without wasting a single precious second, Nydron began issuing orders, sharp, definitive. The Dispersal Beam projectors swung into place, and the new radiant energy missiles, contributed by the Panadurs, took the place of the Strato-bombs. Battle-crews awaited tense and grim the initial frightful blast, for neither one nor the other had been tried before, and the combination of the Dispersal Beam and Radiant-energy Bombs was awe inspiring. Meanwhile the spacer maneuvered with vertiginous speed close to the eastern wall of Globes that formed a side of the quadrilateral, inverted pyramid. And then began the weirdest chase witnessed by man. For as the pyramid sought to expand to avoid the hurtling ship, the spacer accelerated suddenly and focused twin beams of light that became concentric yellow whorls of disintegrating, radio-active energy. It bathed two globes briefly, and simultaneously, a shower of bombs sped unerringly to their mark.

The stupendous concussion rocked even their spacer, as the Radiant-energy Bombs burst in a hellish burst of fire that no human eyes could endure, as if a new sun had been born in the skies. Where the globes had been, nothing remained, and those that had been close nearby, and had been touched by the yellow vortex of the beams, were spinning, lurching out of control in a headlong dive towards the shining sea below.

A great cry of joy went up within the Terran ship, fierce and terrible, as the battle-crews achieved first kill.

But instantly the pyramid shifted globes and closed the gap, and the amethyst-hued net of unimaginable force deepened again until it became almost black. And then a lengthening beam of milky-whiteness shot out of the globe at the apex, probing, relentless . . . and wherever it touched, gigantic tongues of flame licked upwards along its length, as it consumed the screen's energy.

Nydron knew how limitless was the power of that white beam. And too, how

close their margin was. From every projector he had the Dispersal Beam bathe as many globes as possible, and then the radiant energy bombs lashed out.

Saturn seemed to reel. The pyramid was riven, even as the spacer was tossed like a row-boat on a stormy sea. A deafening crescendo of titanic sound flowed over the planet, and coruscating walls of fire enveloped space, as if the titanic rings of Saturn had spilled over into the stricken world.

And relentlessly, the emerald-tinged yellow vortex of the beams continued to be focused on the Cinnabarian globes, while the unbroken salvos of sound went on endlessly until the last fragment of radiant energy was consumed in its own supernal fire, and globes fell like shooting stars.

"WE'VE NEVER known what galaxy spawned them," Margalida, the *Aurean* girl said slowly, in a vibrant contralto that was like the deepest tones of a violin. She shuddered as some unnamable horror of the Cinnabarians flowed through her mind. "But ultimately it was we who unknowingly opened the door to them. They must have been waiting for aeons to enter our Universe . . . only, they didn't quite know how to manipulate the forces necessary to use hyperspace. We did that for them." The silence in the Juvenal chamber was almost a tangible thing.

"You understand the secrets of hyperspace?" There was a Universe of awe in Bill Nardon's tones. "Our greatest scientists hardly dare experiment with the principles involved as yet!"

"Not I, of course," Margalida gave him a wan smile, "but our scientists . . . there are hardly a dozen left, at peace in the deathless sleep. According to your time, this happened over a century ago. I had not come into being then, for I was born in slavery under the rule of the *Energasts*." She pronounced the strange word conveying a mental picture of the four-tentacled overlords.

"For centuries my people had listened to the vibrations of your Astrographs, faint, almost undecipherable, but as time passed, we learned your languages, your customs, recorded even the ages of warfare that swept your planets like a plague. But we

could not reach you—oh, we knew the principles of space flight, but always the gravitational balance of the 'Rings' stopped us; it was a sidereal barrier that seemed impossible to surmount. Strange, we achieved the mathematical formula for orbital flight simultaneously with the breaching of hyperspace. And then it was too late, for in trying to reach you by the shortest possible route, we opened the doors on a Universe that . . . that . . ." But she couldn't go on. The tangible horror of those alien beings who had invaded Saturn overcame her.

Bill Nardon waited until the spasm was over. Then, very gently he inquired: "But with a science so magnificent that you could use hyperspace, surely you must have had weapons that would make ours seem like toys?"

Margalida shook her exquisite head. "Weapons! The very memory of such a thing has been erased from the race consciousness of my people, Terran. It would be so utterly unthinkable for us to slay *anything*, that I doubt if I could make you understand how utterly alien to us such an act would be. For ages and ages no *Aurean* has taken life . . . our will—literally—could not function in that direction. We managed to close the gap, for as you doubtless know, hyperspace is not exactly an energy field, but related to it, and so long as there is matter in gaseous state at both terminals of the orifice, a gap can be repaired in a very brief time cycle. But already it was too late. Hordes of *Energasts* had rushed through from Cinnabar, slaying, drinking our life-energy in a horrible thirst for the divine fire. Entire cities were left deserted, drained of all life, while every living thing in our world came under their power.

"Millions fled to the uninhabited parts of the planet, crossing the immense oceans of lava in a molten state that provide the necessary heat to maintain life, thinking that perhaps the invaders could not follow. At last, my people made their last stand here, in this valley, and built *Sonara*, the city where you found me, and we made a pact that every *Aurean* would submit to cataleptic sleep at the first sign of the *Energasts*.

But even in that they defeated us. They took us by surprise, bridging the lava

oceans in their globes, and enslaving all that had no time to go into catalepsis. Only three million remain now—the sleeping ones. All the rest, and the generations that were born to them, perished in the 'Kiss.' I'm one of the conscious few, for the *Energasts* needed some of us for telepathic transmission. Vibration, as you now know, is their death.

"Down in the depths of that great sea they've built their cities, where preparations for the invasion of your planets has gone on for fifty of your years."

"But couldn't you have made some sort of compromise? Murder on such a vast scale seems pointless, even if they're vampires of life!" Bill Nardon was puzzled.

"Compromise!" A tragic smile lifted the corners of the carved lips. "Yes, we had our choice—although to us there was no alternative—to serve as an invading army to conquer your planets . . . or die!" The *Aurean* girl was silent as if nothing more need be said.

A VAST astonishment held Bill mute, and something akin to a boundless admiration. Here was a people so high in the mental and spiritual scale, that rather than offer resistance and kill, had carried passive resistance to the ultimate point—to the ultimate oblivion even, of catalepsis!

"Would you care to watch the battle?" Bill Nardon asked softly. "Perhaps it will repay you for the agonies you've undergone. I'm sure those four-armed vampires are going to get a taste of their own medicine they've never likely to forget!"

A strange light came into the girl's eyes, something like the ghost of an incalculable past, but she sighed smiling, and shook the golden head that seemed to be crowned with an aura of light.

As Bill stood unwilling to go, held by the glory of the amazing *Aurean* being, the tele-panel in the communications quadrangle glowed into life, and the voice of Nydron himself broke the spell:

"Commander, we're about to begin!" That was all. It was so characteristic of the man. The screen went blank, and Bill Nardon pivoted towards the door enroute to the control room.

The broad shining sea below was a maelstrom of fury, as if convulsed by submarine volcanoes, as the spinning

globes hurtled into its depths. Mountainous spouts of the shimmering liquid seemed to be reaching their descending spacer. Towards the far horizon, the rapidly receding outline of a few surviving spheres raced in pell-mell flight. Silence reigned, but for the tortured heaving of the lashing waves.

"Land as close to the city as possible!" Bill Nardon directed. "And, cut all screens, we'll need every ounce of power." His face was gray, for he needed no experts to tell him what the battle had cost them in energy output. Still, they were alive. Horribly battered and drained to the point of exhaustion, but alive . . . that was the miracle! But now, he had the horrible feeling of a Commander whose base has been destroyed. Where refuel? Where obtain the precious energy to withstand another assault? Bill knew this was not the end. What Cinnabarians still remained in those fathomless depths would never rest until the spacer and all within it was erased from Saturn's face.

Bill thought with a grimace of all those interplanetary spacers that had vanished without trace. "Without Energon Screens, without the invulnerable Vulcanite or the Dispersal Beam, they never had the ghost of a chance . . ." he exclaimed inwardly, and his long, wise-like hands slowly knotted at his sides. Beads of perspiration rolled down his cheeks as he concentrated on finding a solution to their problem.

The staccato sound of the landing signal swept through the ship as they prepared to make contact. In the near distance the great city shone under the illumination of the rings, enveloped in the sepulchral silence of its cataleptic legions.

Bill's eyes widened as the thought slowly evolved into ordered processes in his mind. "The *Aureans* . . ." Involuntarily he spoke aloud. "Hyperspace!" If he could awaken even one of those remaining ancients who knew the secret of hyperspace, he might contact Terra, or one of the inhabited planets. Hope rose like an exultant flame, and he hurried to the Juvenal chamber where Margalida recovered.

At the doorway of the control room, he almost collided with Freml, the Panadur, and it suddenly occurred to Bill he had not seen the silvery Psycho-synthetist for some time.

"Where have you been? Under the treatment?" Bill inquired.

"Of course not!" Freml telepathed disdainfully. "What need have I of such crude methods? As soon as I awoke I left the chamber . . . my people supplied some energy, I needed nothing else. But you're hurrying . . ."

"To the Juvenal Chamber. We have no time to waste!" Bill flashed. "If we can awaken one of those cataleptic *Aurean* scientists, we may get from him the necessary equations to use hyperspace, Freml. . . . It means we can contact our worlds . . . obtain aid!"

"Perhaps I can help," the Panadur thought slowly. "It should not be so difficult to bring them back to conscious life."

He followed Bill into the hushed atmosphere of the Juvenal, his own mind strangely blanked as he communicated with the other Panadurs aboard. It was their way, mysterious, aloof.

And now that the screens were down, the subtle, all-pervading vibrations of the Cinnabarians had commenced again.

THEY would have to don Energon helmets, Bill thought wearily. It was a battle without end. But the sight of Margalida was to him like the sight of an eden seen from the bleak monotony of desert wastes. His electric-blue eyes kindled as the girl smiled, a question in her eyes. She extended a fragile hand that might have been carved of Jadite, and in the husky voice with the harp-like cadences she said:

"I know you've won . . . and for the first time in my life, I have been glad to know that beings have died!"

It was as near as she could come to exult in the extinction of the dreaded *Energasts*.

"You're improving!" Bill's face was illumined by a dazzling smile. "I'm afraid that if you're among us for some time, in the end you'll share our atavistic instincts; even Freml here can blast a hellion out of existence when the need arises," he said with a bright glance to the Panadur. "However, we need your help, Margalida. We want to awaken at least one, more if possible, of the remaining scientists in the deathless sleep. Do you know where they are? Can you direct us to them?"

"Yes," she assented gravely. "They sleep in the second tower, where the traction beams that captured the ships of space for the *Energasts*, are located. I will lead you to them."

"Bring your fellow Panadurs, Fremi, we shall need them," Bill telephated. "This will have to be done with all possible precautions—any moment there may be another attack." A little pulse at the base of his throat trembled as he gazed at Margalida.

The burning roses that were the stars had paled a little, before all the preparations were completed and they were ready to leave the ship. Only Nydron and his battle-crews, with several of the lesser scientists were to remain, for this might be the only chance they would have to wrest the secret from the dormant minds. And then there was Margalida, nothing must happen to her. So Bill Nardon left nothing to chance. Even the austere Juvenal surgeon was to go along, and a protective bodyguard of Mercurian Amazons, power-rapiers and all—bristling with lethal weapons.

These last were the most eager of all. Seeing them in their bulky, serried ranks, Bill Nardon flashed them a clear, blue glance and grinned. The mental picture of these ruthless creatures tangled in mortal combat with the taloned *hominiculi* of the *Energasts*, would have astonished the gods.

But all their preparations were in vain, for suddenly the Ethero-Magnum screen began to glow in the control room, as other screens glowed in the stately central cabin, in the Juvenal Chamber, and even upon the walls of the battle-stations so that what one saw, was the property of all. The sound of indrawn breaths sounded explosive in the stillness; an unbearable tension made the atmosphere electric.

For one agonized instant, no one dared to hope—an anticlimax would have been terrible to endureances that had been tested to the breaking point. In this planet of contradictions and alien madness, *anything* was possible.

Out of the misty darkness of outer space, the streaks of silver that were ships flashed headlong into the monstrous embrace of Saturn, wheeling over the planet's outermost gravitational limits, in

awe-inspiring orbital fall. The strange tug-of-war between the pull of the vast rings, and the giant planet itself, must be neutralized. Swinging in tremendous arcs to lessen the speed they hadn't dared diminish in space, they came in roaring with all braking rockets flaming in great blasts. Behind them, still more silver streaks came into view.

For an awful moment it seemed as if the forces against them would defeat the ships. They seemed to hang static in space, as they turned the night of Saturn red with the furious cataracts of rocket fire. And then—

"They're going to make it. They are!" Bill Nardon exulted fiercely.

V

THE foremost, a Terran spacer, had cut its rockets and swerved, peeling off in a magnificent plunge from dizzying heights into the atmosphere. Behind it streamed the balance of the Terran Fleet, like hounds that had sighted its quarry. And in the nebulous reaches of the stratosphere, the swarm that was still more ships flashed, reflecting the splendor of the rings.

The lofty screen divided itself into two parts now. One segment showed the Terran ship come coasting down in great, breath-taking spirals, followed by its sister vessels, while the upper section mirrored the out-distanced and far more numerous portion of the immense fleet of spacers. They saw the Terran ship level suddenly, and from its bomb bays, a shower of black projectiles dropped swiftly toward some target they could not see. It banked in another wide turn and again its deadly bombs showered down on the maelstrom the first bombs had caused below.

And then they saw the cause of the unexpected maneuver. An immense iridescent globe had risen from the shimmering depths of the sea. Another and another rose from the surface like cosmic bubbles rising from the tossing waves, hurrying to intercept the new invaders before they had a chance to land. The sinister violet haze was rapidly reaching out already, like an immense, emurpled amoeba reaching out with hungry tendrils.

At a sign from Bill Nardon, the great strategist Nydron was at the Tele-radio,

transmitting orders to the Terran ship that now darted and lashed out with its disintegrating rays like a Manthis over a nest of rattlesnakes. "Use your sub-atomic Dispersal Screen, you fools!" He was roaring, "and then strike . . . strike hard with everything you got!" One hand was pounding into the reddened palm of the other.

The balance of the fleet was thundering down now, and they saw the sudden burst of incandescent lightning that was the Energon screen as the Martian vessels turned their unrivalled protection on, then it vanished into invisibility as the screen took hold.

And from the Terran ship, and its sister vessels that had finally caught up, the great yellow beams that turned into vortexes of emerald tinged power burst out, bathing the sinister Globes, enveloping them in their lethal stream. And then, the holocaust began. It seemed as if the liquid depths were spawning hundreds and hundreds of the great spheres, while overhead the sullen skies were black with the flashing vessels of the Inter-Planetary League.

A GREAT Venusian ship caught in the empurpled fog, described a parabola as it plunged out of control and a milky-white beam from the Globes caught it as if on a spear and it plunged headlong into the sea below. The titanic struggle was so appalling that even strong men accustomed to the vicissitudes of battle trembled at the sight.

There was no quarter now. Extinction of one side or the other was the ultimate outcome—there could not be any other possible answer, in that fantastic hecatomb.

"How much power have we?" Bill Nardon asked quietly, and his eyes, shadowed with the knowledge of the awful burden he was about to take upon himself, dwelt briefly on the expectant ones of the Military Strategist.

"Enough for about six hours, if we use the Energon Screen." Nydron said it quietly and with eagerness that was like an expressed hope. "I think we can tip the balance . . . don't you?"

Bill glanced for an instant into the screen, where shimmering globes and the League's ships were falling into the tossing, exploding chaos that was the sea.

He thought of the Martian fleet, protected by the Energon, but powerless to neutralize the Cinnabarian defenses without the Terran Dispersal Beam; of the Venusian ships, helpless in that holocaust, despite their invulnerable Vulcanite Hulls, and, with a catch in his throat, of the gallant Terran vessels, able to draw the fangs from the spheres with the Dispersal Beam, but open to the lethal power of those hellish white beams of the *Energasts*, because they did not have the Multi-Energon. But organized, they could wreak untold havoc on the enemy.

"Give battle orders; we are going up. The Martians, under the protection of their Energon Screens, to get as close as possible to the globes, ready to hurl their bombs, while the Terran ships behind them, screened by the Martian Fleet, aim their Dispersal Beams to neutralize their violet power screens. Keep the Venusians and Mercurians as reserves—that roughly, should be our strategy, modify it as needed, Nydron . . . We'll lead!"

He gazed up into the flaming clouds where the League's Fleet and the *Energasts* had swept upwards in coruscating swirls of intolerable radiance, and then his gaze came to rest on the golden glory of the *Aurean* girl. "Margalida," he said softly, as if there were an ineffable magic in that name. "Almond blossom," he murmured softly to himself, as if in those few, last tragic moments, he would stamp forever the imprint of her loveliness in his heart.

There was no sound. The tortured atmosphere of the planet regained a measure of peace. Only the sea remained monstrosously convulsed as if striving to spew the shattered Globes and spacers now sunk beneath its waves. And on the wind-swept shore, only a fraction of the Inter-Planetary League's great ships had come to rest.

* * * * *

Of the *Energasts* there was no sign—not a single violet globe remained in all that vast expanse, under the blazing glory of the eternal stars. But the victory had been almost a defeat. Countless vessels from all six planets, and still more countless dead would lie forever beneath Saturn's shimmering sea. But the relentless fury of the *Energasts* had been stilled.

And yet . . . It was not over. The enemy

was helpless for a while. He must not be given time to strike again.

For beneath those billowing mountains of translucent liquid that seemed to be strewn with flashing stars, cities—immense cities filled with *Energasts*, what remained of them, had not felt their power as yet. The Absolute only knew what fiendish plans even now were being framed, while the victors strove to recover a measure of strength, and sanity.

IN THE GREAT central cabin of the spacer, where scientists and experts had collected, to lighten in a measure the awful tension of so many hours, Bill Nardon suddenly looked up from the piano—the only real luxury he had requested for himself—and said softly as if thinking aloud:

"So many cities lie in ruins . . . so many nations have been bombed. But this will be the first time in history that a great sea is bombed from shore to distant shore, until not a single shard remains of their structures!"

He looked at Nydron.

"Eh?" Nydron seemed to swim up from a great weariness, and became tense, alert.

"You mean, we'll project the Dispersal Beam into the depths and systematically bomb mile after mile of sea with radiant bombs?" His eyes were awed. "It might take years!"

"Precisely," Nardon nodded with superlative calm. "Even if it takes a century, until not a single *Energast* remains to pollute Saturn!" He smiled coldly, and his long, narrow hands evoked a melodious ripple from the keys.

"Among my studies in correlation, are the appraisal of the methods of the Ancients, from immemorial times. There was one Nation, in reality a city, which was periled by the rivalry of another great metropolis. And in their war of extinction, one city—Rome, evolved a ghastly slogan which guided its treatment of its enemy, the slogan was: '*Delenda est Cartago*!' And if it takes a century, we shall be able to say, '*Delenda est Cinnabar*!' He fell silent, and in the momentary hush, his hands began to weave a mesh of beauty as they hovered over the piano keys. It was a magical undulation of the B Flat tonality . . . a divine lullaby to a wonderful child—a girl utterly beloved,

**Back the
Attack with
WAR BONDS!**

**Buy more than your
share... Their share
is fighting and
dying! Every pay
day, remember—
they are paying in
sweat and blood!**

CHIMERA WORLD

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

Don Denton had walked into the weirdest enigma he had ever encountered. Dead men lived, and ships vanished without sound. And to top everything, when he tried to unravel the puzzle—he found that he had been dead for more than a week.

Illustration by KIEMLE

DON DENTON, trouble shooter for the Inter-World Mining Corporation, watched the sailors stowing the supplies aboard his small scout rocket, checking the items from the manifest sheet as they were packed in the storage compartments.

"That takes care of that," he said finally, signing the sheet with his thumbprint. "Now, I'll be on my way."

The Skipper nodded, scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I suppose so," he agreed. "Are you sure you won't stay to dinner? I've got a cargo of Martian *panyanox* that should taste plenty good to you after two months of spacing on vitamins."

Don Denton grinned, scrubbed a heavy hand through the reddish, curly mop of hair that flamed above his craggy face. He shrugged, the leather jacket growing taut across his deceptively wide shoulders.

"Nothing I'd like better," he said, "but I've got orders to get to Venus and find out why the *Lanka* shipments haven't been coming through on schedule."

"Trouble?" Interest flared in the Skipper's eyes.

Don Denton laughed. "I doubt it," he said. "Probably some space tramp landed and sold the men some Martian *Ganto* seeds. They're probably nursing such large hangovers that they can't work. I'll just take the supplies on, give the boys a pep talk, then head back for Earth."

"All loaded, Captain," a sailor's voice came from the television screen.

Don Denton lounged to his feet. "So long, Captain," he said, "I'll remember that *Panyanox* invitation, the next time I run into you on Mars."

"Sure, sure, of course!" The Skipper flushed. "Er, ah—, Denton?"

"Yes?" Don Denton turned from the door.

"I've got a passenger I want to transport to Venus."

Don Denton grinned, shook his head. "Sorry, Captain," he said, "but no can do; company rules, you know."

"But this passenger—?"

"No," Denton said decisively, "In the first place, I can't carry passengers on the scout; and in the second place, I haven't the slightest desire to be holed up with anybody. Sorry, but your passenger will have to get a charter job for the trip."

"What I'm trying to tell you," the Skipper said, "is that Miss Palmer has a Company pass to ride with you."

"Miss Palmer!" The trouble shooter frowned belligerently. "Any relation to Palmer who is the manager on Venus?"

"Daughter, I think."

"Well, you can tell Miss Palmer for me that she's out of luck. Hell, I'll make a bet she's one of two kinds of dames: Either she's the flighty kind who thinks it's just too too divine to explore another planet, or she's the needle-nosed kind who'd drive me nuts with her complaints in half a clock-around!"

"I can assure you that she fits neither of those descriptions," the Skipper said, smiled. "In fact, she's about the nicest bit of meteor fluff that's crossed my rockets in many a day."

"Thank you, Captain," Jean Palmer said amusedly from behind Don Denton. She walked past the trouble shooter, turned to face him squarely. "Woman hater?" she finished quizzically.

Don Denton flushed, his tan deepening, his startlingly blue eyes evading the mocking, brown eyes of the girl. He shifted nervously from foot to foot, his collar suddenly tight and constricting.

"Er—no!" he said defensively, "I—er, well, just don't want any company on my ship."



The dis-gun waited in Denton's fist.

He felt the flush deepening beneath the level glance of the girl, and hot blood was suddenly pounding at his temples.

The Captain had been right; certainly she didn't fit either of the descriptions Don Denton had given. She was tall, her softly waved crown of hair almost even with the trouble shooter's mouth. And the manish cut of her plastic dress only served to emphasize the femininity of her body.

BUT DON DENTON was not noticing such minor details; he was conscious only of the incredible redness and smoothness of her lips and of the level appraisal of her eyes. He shivered suddenly, vaguely aware that he was unshaven, gangly, with too prominent teeth and ears.

"I have a pass to ride with you," the girl said mockingly, "Do you think you can get around it?" Her tone changed, became suddenly, subtly, frightened and bewildered. "Please," she finished, "I must go with you! I haven't heard from my father in three months; I know that something has happened to him!"

"Well," Don Denton frowned, was suddenly aware of the dim perfume of her hair. "I guess, if you've got a pass, there's nothing I can do but take you along."

"That's fine!" the Skipper said heartily, a trifle relievedly. "I told Miss Palmer you'd probably be glad to give her a lift."

"I knew Mr. Denton wouldn't let me down," the girl said quietly, "I've heard too many stories of his bravery and gallantry."

Don Denton grinned sheepishly, not absolutely certain as to whether the girl was being ironical or not. He searched her face, felt a distinct shock to his nerves when his gaze met with hers.

"Just routine," he countered deprecatingly.

He shrugged, shook hands quickly with the Skipper. "I'll see you in a couple of months. Thanks for bringing the supplies out of your regular lane; it saved me several weeks of spacing to Earth and back."

"That's all right, Denton," the Captain said, "I still remember the fight you put up when those Gillies attacked my ship off—"

"Sure, sure!" Don Denton cut the flow of the other's words, swung to face the girl. "I'll have a man put your duffle aboard, Miss Palmer."

She smiled, her teeth flashing whitely. "Thank you, but I had them taken aboard half an hour ago."

Don Denton blinked in surprise, and the corners of his mobile lips twitched in a wry smile. "All right, then," he said, "let's be getting on; if we miss connections, we'll have to chase Venus halfway round the sun."

He led the way down the corridor, his thoughts a maelstrom in his mind. He was not a woman hater, nor did he care for them especially, but there was something about the level-eyed slender girl at his back that stirred him deeply. He shook his head slightly, wished that he had not stopped to pick up the supplies from the freighter. He had a vague premonition that the even tenor of his life was destined to be rudely shattered by an indefinable something that he could not fight with the strength of his rangy body nor the solidity of his fists.

THE COMET sped in a long parabola from the side of the freighter, a long skid-mark of flaming rocket gas in the darkness behind, and headed obliquely toward Venus which gleamed greenly far ahead.

Don Denton pressed the last of a series of studs on the control panel, cut in the robot-pilot, then grinned admiringly at Jean Palmer.

"Sorry I was rude back there," he apologized.

The girl's answering smile was like a ray of light in the cabin. She stretched lazily in the padded seat, brushed a vagrant lock of hair from her eyes.

"I guess it was my fault," she admitted. "I never stopped to think that you might not like the job of playing space taxi with me. But," her eyes were suddenly serious, "I simply have to see if anything is wrong with my father."

Don Denton grinned. "There's nothing to be afraid of on Venus," he said confidently. "I've been there half a dozen times, and all I've found was a water world, with very little land. About the only life on the planet is of a fish type, which lives deep in the oceans."

"That's what my father told me."

"Well, he was exactly right; it's about the deadest world I've seen. There are

nine patches of land, probably mountain tops, and each of them are covered with *Lanka* plants. I suppose you know that that is what your father is doing there—that is, he's cutting and rendering the plants for their oil?"

Jean nodded. "Yes, he told me. But after all—"

She screamed suddenly, clutched wildly at the arms of her seat. And the motion sent her flying into the air, where she struggled for a balance that wasn't there.

"Easy," Don Denton said, reached out, drew her back to her seat, "It's that blasted gravity rotor again!"

HE WENT sideways from his seat, catching a flashlight from a wall-clip as he did so, then pulled himself by the wall hand rail toward the rear of the cabin.

"I'm going to be ill," Jean said weakly.

"Chin up," Don Denton said sharply. "I'll have everything all right in a moment. The clutch on the gravity rotor is about shot, and it quits on me every now and then. When the gravity gets back to normal, you'll feel all right again."

He turned on his back, wedged himself beneath a small metal box clamped to the rear wall, swinging the light of the hand flash into the interior of the box. He made a one-handed adjustment, and normal gravity grasped them again.

The light of his flash faded, went out, as the gravity became stabilized, then flashed on again the moment the trouble shooter edged from beneath the gravity rotor.

Jean Palmer gasped, and slowly color came back to her white face. Don Denton nodded to himself, strode back to the pilot's seat, slumped indolently into its padded depths. He flicked the switch on the flashlight, pushed it into its wall-clip.

"What made the light go out?" Jean asked curiously.

Don Denton shrugged. "The rotor creates some sort of an energy shield," he said, "that blankets out all electrical energy." He gazed solicitously at the girl. "Feel better now?"

She nodded. "I think so," she said. "I just felt so funny—as though everything in me was upside down."

Don Denton grinned. "I know," he

said, "I started spacing when a man rode a ship with the seat of his pants; I've been plenty sick from lack of gravity. Hah! this new crop of spacers don't know what it is to live without gravity for months, then find they can't walk the minute they land on some planet—because of gravity pull."

"You've done that?" Jean's eyes were wide with wonder.

Don Denton grinned self-consciously. "Without bragging," he said, "I think I've just about done everything and seen everything. There's very little that would surprise me."

Jean laughed, and the sound was a tinkling overtone above the dim roar of the rockets. "You know," she said, "you're a rather remarkable person!"

Don Denton flushed, dry-washed his hands in embarrassment. "Aw," he said self-consciously, "I'm just doing a job."

"Well, I like you."

Don Denton became very busy with the compact integrator, his hands suddenly all thumbs.

Jean Palmer leaned over, touched his arm with a slender hand. "I'm glad you're the one taking me to my father," she said, "If there is anything wrong, I'm certain you can straighten it out."

"I'll try." Don Denton met the girl's eyes squarely. "Now you'd better take a dose of sleep rays; after all, it will be about eighty hours before we land."

"Sleep rays on a space ship!"

"Yes!" Don Denton paused with one hand on a control stud. "You see, a scouter isn't like a pleasure craft or a freighter. Nine-tenths of the time aboard is spent sleeping—conserves food and oxygen."

"All right, Don," Jean said, relaxed comfortably in the cushions.

DON DENTON pressed the stud, sighed deeply as the purple ray coned down from the overhead bulb and bathed the girl in its nimbus. He straightened the girl's arms a trifle, careful not to permit his head to be touched by the rays, then swung back to the integrator. Jean slept peacefully, a slight smile skidding a dimple into sight, the curves of her breasts rising and falling in a gentle rhythm.

Don Denton shrugged, bent again over the integrator. He set up the combination

he desired, pressed keys, glanced absently at the answer. Nodding, he set the course on the robot-pilot, sighed gustily, sank tiredly into the heavy cushions of his seat.

He sat quietly for moments, the smile going from his eyes, a slight frown thinning his mobile mouth. He was more worried than he would have admitted. For this was the first time in eighteen months that the *Lanka* shipments had not come through on schedule from Venus.

The fern-like *Lanka* plants were of incalculable value to the inhabited worlds, for the oil rendered from the plants was the only perfect cure for cancer and numerous other diseases. Its curative powers had been discovered accidentally by two wrecked spacers on Venus three years before when one of the spacers had been cured of space-tuberculosis by an enforced diet of cooked plants and Venusian fish.

Don Denton remembered the regularity with which the shipments had been coming through and the worry the head office had felt when the oil had failed to arrive on time two months before. He had been called in as a last resort, because he knew the planet from past experience, and because of his reputation as a trouble shooter who always got results.

He was worried now. For despite his assurances to Jean Palmer, he knew that there were dangers on Venus. In the depths of its oceans, great, foul, nightmarish creatures lived sluggish lives, and if some accident should rouse them to action, they might well wipe out an entire camp in a few moments. Then again, because of the incredible value of the oil, space pirates might have raided the base camp, murdered the men, then escaped with the oil already rendered.

"Damn!" Don Denton said thoughtfully.

He glanced at the sleeping girl, smiled slightly. He felt a sudden protective instinct in his heart that had never been there before, and his hands clenched unconsciously at the thought of what disappointments and heartaches might lie ahead for her.

He shrugged then, grinned wryly into space. Well, there was nothing he could do now but wait. If there was some sort of trouble on Venus, he would have enough trouble then in trying to cope with it; there was no sense in worrying himself

stiff about it now. He'd know soon enough.

He clicked on the automatic mechanism of the sleep ray, drifted into dreamless slumber as the purple rays erased all conscious thought from his mind.

II

VENUS was no longer a green planet; it loomed ahead like some woolly ball spinning in space. The *Comet* circled it warily, Don Denton's fingers resting lightly on the control studs of the instrument panel, his lips pursed a bit as he drove the ship closer to the clouds.

"It will probably be several hours before we land," he explained to the wide-eyed Jean at his side, "Trying to find the *Lanka* camp in that soup down there is quite a job in itself, even after I get the *Comet* through fifteen miles of cloud banks."

Jean was a trifle pale, but there was a spark of confidence in her eyes. "I think," she said quietly, "I feel like you must have felt the first time you landed here."

Don Denton smiled. "There's no feeling like it," he admitted, "I felt it first on the Earth's Moon, and I knew then that I'd never be able to settle down into some routine job. I suppose I'll end my life still feeling that thrill, still seeking out hidden places in the universe."

He pressed a firing stud, and the *Comet* flashed down toward Venus. For the first time, there was a sense of movement, as the spinning clouds rushed to meet the ship. Always before, with nothing relative to compare their speed with, and because the inertia-field sent all molecules of ship and contents ahead at the same rate of speed, there had been the sensation of staying at rest in the blackness of space. Now, there was something breathtaking in the way that the ship seemed to be dropping.

Then the first tendrils of cloud whipped lazily about the *Comet*. There was the thrum of the rockets rising to a higher crescendo, and the force screen's voltmeter leaped higher to combat the friction of the tenuous air. Another second, and the great cottony batts of cloud pressed with invisible force against the ship.

And then there was only a grey darkness outside, all light from the sun nullified by the thicknesses of clouds.

Don Denton drifted the ship lower, his fingers flying over the control studs, handling the ship's weight as a horseman controls his mount by a light touch of the reins.

There seemed to be no mental passage of time while the ship was sinking. Moments flowed into each other, and always the clouds seemed to be pressing with a tenuous strength at the quartzite ports.

Then they were through the clouds, and a thousand feet below the ocean tossed and tumbled with a majestic silence that was thrilling and menacing.

Don Denton's breath escaped with a tiny sigh of relief, and his eyes flashed to the girl's face, then back again to the window. He was conscious of the close scrutiny she had given him during those tense moments, and he wondered, irrelevantly, if he measured up to her standards.

"Where's all of the light coming from?" she asked curiously.

"From some sort of minute animal life in the oceans. The water is so filled with tiny worm-like forms of life that I doubt if you could find one cupful of clear water anywhere. They glow like fireflies, and the light generated is reflected back from the low clouds." Don Denton grinned. "I used to call Venus the 'Light bulb planet'!"

"It's beautiful!" Jean breathed in rapture.

Don Denton nodded, swung the *Comet* directly North. Beneath them, the ocean was a shifting, white-capped wash of silvery light, gleaming with a phosphorescent sheen, its turbulence a shifting kaleidoscope of shattered colors.

And then the water was broken, and a scaly, blunt something darted out of the water, fell crashing in a spray of light.

"What was that?" Jean whispered.

Don Denton swallowed heavily. "I don't know," he said slowly. "Probably some deep sea monster; and he must have been fully three hundred feet long!"

He sent the *Comet* flashing ahead, the memory of the scaly monster tensing his broad shoulders in a shiver of disquiet. Jean sat silently at his side, quiet for once, and he felt a quick stab of emotion when he read the worry that lay deep in her eyes.

They cruised for almost an hour before

Don Denton located the base camp. It had moved from island One to island Three, and its earthly regularity in the green of the *Lanka* jungle was pleasant to see.

"Five minutes," Don Denton said cheerfully, "and you can surprise your dad."

"Oh, hurry!" Jean said, bent close to the port-window.

DON DENTON nodded silently, but there was suddenly a great fear in him. For nowhere in the camp below was there a sign of life.

Smoke was not bulging from the short stack of the rendering plant, and men did not dart from the small shacks to greet the landing ship. The camp appeared to be deserted.

"I don't see anyone?" Jean said puzzledly, fearfully.

Don Denton forced a confident laugh, but his eyes were entirely serious. "They're all probably out in the jungle grubbing up the best grade of plants. Don't worry, when they hear the rockets, they'll come stringing in plenty fast."

He set the *Comet* down squarely in the middle of the clearing, touched studs, and there was an immediate cessation of noise and vibration.

"This is it," Don Denton said quietly, "Slip on an oxy-helmet, and we'll take a look around."

He smiled away some of the growing fear in the girl's eyes, but there was a growing panic in him that he could not quell.

He could see no one; there was not the slightest sign of life. Yet there should be fifteen men working here? Don Denton shrugged, and there was suddenly a steely gleam in his eyes. He slipped the light helmet over his head, fastened the airtight cloth beneath his chin.

"Let's go, Jean," he said into the tiny transmitter of his helmet, "Be careful not to dislodge your helmet; the air will make you ill unless you are acclimated to it."

He could see the tiny tremulous smile on her lips, and he held her hand tightly for a moment. Then he spun the cogs of the port-door, felt the slight breeze about his body as the higher compressed air of the ship souged into the heavy air of Venus.

He helped the girl to the muddy ground, lifted the ati-gun from his belt, paced slowly toward the main hut, his eyes flashing everywhere for the slightest sign of danger, absolutely certain now that things here were even worse than he had conceived them to be.

There was an indefinable threat of danger in the stillness of the great clearing that tightened Don Denton's nerves. Far away, could be heard the dull rumble of the eternal waves on the island's edge, and closer could be heard the soft hissing of the air through the green *Lanka* fronds.

The clearing had been baked brick-hard with an ati-cannon; now its surface was spotted with soupy puddles of green mud where the every-day rains had seeped into some hollow.

Two freighters squatted near the North edge of the clearing, their dulled sides scabrous with great patches of growing rust, their empty ports like great blank staring eyes watching the two terrestrials slowly approach the main hut.

"Don," Jean pressed close to the trouble shooter's tall body, "where is everybody?"

Don Denton shook his head, a furry spider of apprehension crawling up his spine, his eyes piercing and searching as he held the ati-gun in a tremorless hand. He walked slowly forward, the eeriness of the silver-lighted scene touching his sensibilities.

He fired the moment the slug-like creature came from the hut's door, the wailing hiss of the gun strangely loud. There was a silent scream that crescendoed and titillated in diminishing waves, then the creature collapsed into a protoplasmic mass that quivered horribly for a moment and then was still.

"Don!" Jean said fearfully.

The trouble shooter's face was like chiselled granite, and he stepped to the door of the hut and rayed the stinking mass of bubbly flesh out of existence. He handed the twin ati-gun to the girl, nodded toward the hut's interior.

"Stay here," he snapped, "while I take a look inside. Shoot at anything that moves."

He smiled then for the first time, seeing the determination in the lines of the girl's chin. Then he whirled, stepped within the doorway, his nerves icy cold, the flat

muscles of his body ready for instant darting action.

He stopped, his breathing a startled gasp. Eight men were within the hut, eight men lying in the stillness of death.

"Good God!" he said, paced swiftly across the floor to the tiers of bunks along the far wall.

He went from man to man, feeling for a pulse on each man, the cold sweat of terror breaking on his forehead when he was finally convinced that all eight of the hut's occupants were dead.

He shivered, backed to the door, his eyes darting about the cabin, a sharp prodding prescience within him that every movement of his was being watched. He closed the door, stood speechlessly beside the girl for a moment.

"What is it, Don; what did you find?" Jean's fingers tightened on his biceps.

DON DENTON swallowed heavily, avoided the girl's eyes. "Let's take a look at the other sleeping hut," he said tonelessly, tried to keep the horror he felt from his expression.

"There is something wrong; I know it!" Jean went rigid, her breath catching in her throat. "My father's in there!"

Don Denton shook his head. "No," he said sharply, "he isn't in there; he's probably in the other hut." He caught the girl's arm. "Let's take a look, before something happens that's too big for me to handle."

They walked swiftly, their guns ready for instant firing, strangely comforted by each other's presence. At the doorway of the second hut, Jean again stood guard while the trouble shooter entered.

He stood for a moment within the doorway of the hut, his nerves crawling when he saw an almost exact duplicate of the first scene. The only difference lay in the number of men supine in their bunks: there were but six here.

Don Denton winced, recognizing a corpse on a lower bunk as the grey-haired father of the girl outside. He felt a sick futility beating at his mind, when he remembered the reassuring words he had spoken to the girl but a few short hours before.

He moved about the hut, seeking for the slightest clue as to the cause of the men's deaths, finally turning back to the door,

his search unrewarded, his mind a maelstrom of conflicting theories and thoughts.

"Jean?" he said quietly, closed the door behind him on the horrible scene within.

Blood drained from his face, leaving it suddenly haggard and drawn. He whirled, with his back to the hut's wall, the ati-gun jutting nervelessly before him in complete command of the clearing.

Not a thing moved; there was only the slightest of breezes. He felt the sweat trickling down the flat planes of his cheeks, and the metal of the hut felt incredibly warm against his back.

"Jean?" he called again, desperately.

There was only the muffled hollow vibration of the eternal waves pounding against the island. No voice answered his cry.

Jean Palmer was gone as though she had never been.

DON DENTON stood rigidly for a moment, a nameless fear tugging at his mind, his blue eyes suddenly black with fear for the safety of the girl.

"Jean?" he called again, knowing that there would be no answer.

He ran lithely across the end of the clearing, burst into the first living-hut, made a quick search, dashed back outside, a monstrous fear and hate intermingled in his mind.

He went more slowly toward the first freighter, slipped within the uncogged port, moved even more slowly as he made a complete search of the shadowy corners of the hold and cabins. He found nothing but the mold and rust that came from the steamy atmosphere.

The second freighter proved to be empty also. And he stood for a moment outside its rusty length, his lips a thin white line, his eyes narrowed into slits.

Then, never permitting himself to relax, he made a complete search of the grounds, investigating the huts again, searching the rendering sheds, finally stopping, his heart thudding painfully, in the exact center of the clearing.

He considered the situation briefly, and his mind came to an abrupt stop against a wall of thought. Either the girl had disappeared into the *Lanka* jungle because she thought she had seen something or someone there, or she had been captured, silently, by the menace that had murdered

the fourteen men who lay in the bunks within the huts.

Don Denton backed slowly toward the *Comet*, his ati-gun tight in his hand, never relaxing, ready to fire at the first sign of a living thing that moved. He uncogged the door-port, slipped through, cogged the door shut again. Then he searched the tiny ship from bow to stern, making absolutely certain that he was alone.

Satisfied that he was safe for the moment, he sagged into the cushions of the pilot's seat, tried to make sense out of the sudden disappearance of the girl.

Obviously, there was something wrong with the island. Fourteen men were dead, *Lanka* plants rotting in the shed, the freighters empty hulks on the clearing's edge.

But what could that menace be? He knew, personally, that the only life on Venus was in the oceans, a life that had not progressed far enough to permit it to cope with the brains and skill of men.

Yet Jean Palmer was gone, taken by the—the *things* that had slain fourteen men without leaving wounds on their bodies.

Don Denton swore bitterly, his hands clutching the arms of the seat until the knuckles were like polished bone. It was only too evident that the terror had struck but recently; the men's bodies were not decomposed in the slightest.

The trouble shooter came from his seat, slid back the panel of the arms cabinet. He slipped into the silk-like folds of the cellu-ray suit, first discarding the oxy-helmet. Then he fitted on the wide belt that held the super ati-guns, checked them to make certain their loads were at maximum power.

He felt a slight dizziness from the tainted air that had filled the ship when the port had been opened, shrugged the feeling away with the knowledge that his space-hardened body could easily combat the slight toxic poison without effort.

He packed a small knapsack with a compact medicine box and food, left a water bottle behind, knowing that he could find rain puddles in the heavy *Lanka* leaves.

The rain started then without warning, coming down in a solid smashing sheet, the blasting wind rocking the *Comet* with titanic strength. Don Denton scowled

through the storm, his vision stopped five feet from the quartzite port window by the smashing curtain of water from the low hanging clouds.

He paced the control room in tight anxiety, feeling the fear mounting within him, conscious of the driving urgency of quick action, but knowing that he could not fight the torrential downpour.

The rain battered down in a solid sheet for more than an hour.

And then the rain was over, and there was only the eerie silver light reflected from the clouds. Don Denton uncoiled impatiently from his seat, fitted on the knapsack, slipped the oxy-helmet over his head, tied the bottom strings about his throat.

He felt a momentary panic at the thought of stepping from the safety of his ship on the land where death might strike unseen. Then he grinned wryly, shrugged broad shoulders. He had his job to do, a job that he had elected for himself. Too, there was the memory of Jean's presence that drove him on. If for no other reason, he could not desert the girl who had expressed such complete faith in himself.

He twisted the cogs of the port, set the vibra-ray so that no one else could open the door unless he was along. He slipped a bit on the mud of the clearing, turned, slammed the port shut. Then, with a super ati-gun in his right hand, he started across the clearing toward the break in the jungle that was obviously a path cut by the *Lanka* hunters.

It was then that he halted, his eyes widening in surprise, the sound of his breathing loud in his oxy-helmet. He swung in a complete circle, stifling his gasp of wonder, feeling the fear knotting in his stomach, and conscious of the scaly fingers of insanity plucking at his reason.

For men moved about the rendering hut, and steam spurted from the tall stacks.

Don Denton half-crouched, and a soundless snarl of amazement twisted his lips. His eyes flashed from the working men around the clearing, blinked bewilderedly at what they saw.

Or, rather, what they didn't see.

For the freighters were gone, vanished from where they had been, only deep gouges in the ground to show that they had ever landed.

III

DON DENTON swore soundlessly to himself, and the gun sagged momentarily in his hand. He felt the insane desire to laugh, fought down the feeling with an iron will.

This was too much; this was carrying things too far. Those men moving about the rendering shed were dead, so dead that there had been no pulse of heart-beats in their veins. Yet they walked and worked with a smooth efficiency about the shed five hundred feet away.

And the freighters had vanished into the clouds. Yet that, too, was impossible; for the rocket blasts would have created such a roar in the air that he could not have missed their going.

It was as though his mind had tricked him, had conjured chimeras and mirages out of the air to strip his reason away.

He stiffened, the gun lifting in his hand, as one of the men working about the shed turned and ran directly down the field. He gasped silently, recognizing the greyed hair and ruddy face of Jim Palmer.

His hand snapped to a small button on his helmet.

"Hold it, Palmer, don't come any closer!" His voice roared from the tiny annunciator built into the top of his helmet.

Jim Palmer skidded to a stop, menaced by the ati-gun, fell, sprawling in the green mud, as his sudden stop tripped him on the treacherous ground. Amazement made a round O of his mouth, and the glad greeting faded from his eyes.

"What the hell, Denton?" he said sharply. "Have you gone space batty?"

Don Denton laughed without humor, shifted the gun muzzle slightly.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But I'm not taking any chances on anything until I find out what's going on!"

"What do you mean: 'What's going on'?" Jim Palmer pushed himself to his feet, wiped slimy mud onto his breeches' legs. "Hell," he finished, "all of us thought you were dead!"

"You—," Don Denton swallowed, blinked desperately, "You thought I was dead?" he croaked.

"Why, sure!" Jim Palmer waved an expressive hand. "We tried to get into your ship for more than a week, but couldn't.

And we could see you crumpled in the pilot's seat. So we figured you had died."

"Look, Palmer," Don Denton said, "I like jokes as well as the next spacer. But I don't like the smell of this one! Now, what's the set-up here?"

"Well, it's just like the one I had on island Seven. I—"

Don Denton's voice was like chilled steel. "Keep up that clowning," he snapped, "And I'll blow it out of you with an ati-gun blast!"

Jim Palmer paled, took a backward step. "Now, look, Denton," he said placatingly, "I'm not looking for a fight with you; I've always figured we were friends. If you've got some gripe, get it off your chest, and maybe we can get it straightened out!"

Don Denton felt insanity growing in his mind. He sucked in a deep breath, never taking his eyes from Palmer's sweat-streaked face. He didn't know what was going on, could not find a coherent answer for anything, and the empty feeling it left within him frightened him as he had never felt fear before.

Less than an hour before, he had locked himself in his ship, after seeing fourteen dead men in the huts and after Jean had disappeared; and now Jim Palmer was telling him that that had happened more than a week before. Too, he was implying that Don Denton was mentally unbalanced.

Don Denton then felt the prescience of an alien presence at his back.

He whirled, spun to one side, his finger tight on the firing stud of the atomic gun in his fist.

Then, his face working in surprise, he turned slowly completely about, finally facing Jim Palmer again. His eyes went wide, when he saw the furtive, fearful steps the other was taking toward the safety of the rendering shed.

"Well, Denton," Palmer said worriedly, "I'll talk to you later."

"Stand right where you are!" There was a quiver to the trouble shooter's voice despite his iron control. "I've just started to ask questions. First, where's Jean?"

"Why she went back to Earth on the Moonstone, the larger freighter. That was four days ago. She was pretty well broken up when she thought you were dead."

Don Denton's forehead washboarded in thought. "There's something fishy here

that I don't understand," he said, "but I'm going to get to the bottom of it."

"Look, Denton," Palmer's tone was solicitous. "Why don't you let Carter, the doctor, take a look at you. I mean no offense; but you sound as if you either had a concussion or a touch of space fever." He gestured comfortably. "Come on, take off your helmet, and the Doc'll find out what's wrong."

DON DENTON was fumbling at the lace of his light copper helmet unconsciously, before he realized what he was doing. For some unknown reason, he felt that Palmer might be right and that he might have some brain injury. Then some vague stubbornness filled his mind, driving away his sudden compliance. His free hand snapped to his belt, whipped out the second ati-gun.

"How is it that you and your men are walking around?" he asked, "I could have sworn you were dead?"

He waited for the other's answer, conscious of an agonizing headache that had sprung out of nowhere. He still felt that he and Palmer were not alone, but his quick whirl a moment before had failed to disclose any lurker in the vicinity.

And now, for the first time, he saw the eyes of Jim Palmer clearly. There was something in them that he could not understand, a pleading to be understood that escaped his senses. And the something that was in them was oddly at variance with the smile on the ruddy face and the reassuring words.

"You must have seen us when we were asleep," Jim Palmer explained, "After working on these *Lanka* plants for so long a time, you get such a slow steady heart action that it takes a stethoscope to find it."

"Maybe?" Don Denton said skeptically, "But I still think you were dead."

Jim Palmer laughed, the sound a long booming roll of mirth that drew curious glances from the workers at the rendering shed. His lips writhed back, and his shoulders shook with merriment, but his eyes never changed expression.

"Do we *look* dead?" he asked mirthfully.

"It isn't what you look like, it's what you are that counts," Don Denton coun-

tered, "I've seen Martian Zombies that got around pretty well."

"Yes," Jim Palmer nodded. "I've seen them. But they don't breathe or eat; and I can assure you that my men and I do both."

He stepped forward, stretched his hand in a friendly gesture. "Come on," he finished, "put away your guns, and come meet the men. Maybe the Doc had better take a look at you, too; you don't look so well, you've probably got a touch of fever giving you hallucinations."

Steam hissed from the muddy ground between them as the trouble shooter fired his left hand gun. "I'm not joking," he snapped, "Make a move I don't like, and I'll be damned certain you're dead!"

Jim Palmer sucked in his breath with an audible gasp, and muscles rippled in his heavy shoulders as his arms came up in a threatening gesture.

"You're making a mistake, Denton," he said brittly.

And, without warning, his face white and strained, he sprang at the other, his whipping arms smashing the guns aside.

THE TWIN ati-guns roared in a wailing scream of unleashed power, their released streams of energy charring the ground, as Don Denton's hands clenched in sudden reflex.

Then the guns were hammered aside, and the bull-like body of Jim Palmer was straining at the trouble shooter's lithe strength. For one interminable instant, Don Denton wavered on his feet, then he went backward, carried by the other's weight, his mind numbed by the paralyzing shock that came from a sledge-like fist hammering at his chest.

He rolled as he fell, twisted, and his right hand lashed out in a desperate effort to reach one of the fallen guns. A heavy knee pinned his arm to the ground, and he gasped from Palmer's weight on his chest.

He arched his body, tossed Palmer to one side, smashed at him with a two-handed attack that hurled the heavy man a dozen feet away. He slipped as he tried to follow his advantage, felt Palmer's hands tearing at the globe of his oxy-helmet. He felt a lace break below his chin, and then his right hand came up in a vicious right cross.

Palmer sagged, half unconscious from the blow, went entirely slack, as the trouble shooter crossed his left and then his right.

Don Denton crouched for a moment, staring into the blank face of the camp manager, his chest heaving, feeling a slight dizziness as the air of Venus mingled with that of his damaged oxy-helmet.

Then the wailing hiss of an ati-gun brought him to his feet. He dived for his twin guns, turned, raced for the safety of the *Comet*, feeling the tingle of released energy as his cellu-ray suit dissipated the shock of a direct ati-blast on his back.

He fired twice, as a warning gesture, at the men streaming from the rendering shed, smiled grimly as the tight knot of pursuers broke into individuals.

And then he was at his ship, the vibra-ray lock swinging the port open automatically. He spun through the port, cogged it shut behind him, sagged against its solid friendliness, utterly worn with the furious action of the past few minutes.

Gradually, his breathing slowed to normal, and some of the unnatural fright of the past moments loosened their icy clutch from about his heart. He removed his oxy-helmet, dropped it carelessly to the floor, went slowly to the control room of the ship. He stared from the quartzite port, his brow furrowing in puzzlement.

Two of the *Lanka* workers were helping the stunned Palmer to his feet, while the rest of the men gazed woodenly toward the *Comet*. Then, as though turned by some common command, the entire group whirled, stalked back across the field, disappeared within the rendering shed.

Don Denton shook his head in bewilderment, sank tiredly into the pilot's seat, found one of his carefully rationed cigarettes in a panel box. Touching a radi-light to its end, he leaned back in the cushions, drew slowly on the fragrant smoke.

"Whew!" he sighed explosively, winced when his exploring fingers found the great bruise on his chest where Palmer had struck so viciously.

He went over the entire, bizarre situation point by point; and as the moments passed he made less sense out of the entire proceedings. He couldn't figure the slightest of reasons from what was happening. He tried to rationalize the events, ended at a blind alley of thinking.

First, he had the fact that the *Lanka* shipments had failed to make their scheduled appearances. So he had been sent to investigate. Jean Palmer had come along, ostensibly to see her father. Then, after landing, he had killed some Venusian slug, and found fourteen dead men in their bunks. Right after that, Jean had disappeared into thin air. An hour and a half later, the dead men were alive, and he had been attacked by Jim Palmer, whose friend he thought he was.

Don Denton scowled bleakly into space. This set-up was too screwy for him! He thought for a moment of rocketing into space and bringing back the Space Patrol to make a complete investigation.

His blue eyes narrowed abruptly, as he caught sight of the perpetual calendar on the wall. Hell! It was still the same day as the day he had arrived on Venus.

Which meant that Jim Palmer had lied.

He snapped his fingers in sudden thought. Palmer had not tried to injure him, instead, he had merely tried to remove the oxy-helmet.

And that meant another mystery. For Palmer knew that the faintly tainted air of Venus would not knock out the trouble-shooter.

The trouble shooter growled deep in his throat, crushed out the cigarette, stood and paced to the port window. He frowned from the port, watched the men coming toward the rocket ship. He felt no uneasiness, for he knew that the hull would be impervious to any ati-blasts they might fire in trying to force an entrance.

Then he stiffened, the blood draining from his face.

For walking quietly in the middle of the tight group was Jean Palmer.

Don Denton swore briefly, didn't move. He watched, as the group came quietly to a halt a hundred feet from the *Comet*, their tightness melting away as they stopped.

Then Don Denton saw Jim Palmer lift a heavy strip of leather belt, swing it with a brutal viciousness at the slender shoulders of his daughter.

Don Denton whipped around, a white hot rage blazing in his mind, his breath a choking mass in his throat, as he dashed for the port door. He uncogged it with trembling hands, pushed it open, dropped

through, the ati-guns cold in his sweaty hands.

He ran toward the silent group, conscious that Palmer's arms was lifting for another blow. His hand swept up for a snap-shot.

"Drop that gun, Denton," Palmer snapped.

Don Denton snarled soundlessly, squared the muzzle of the ati-blaster on Palmer's broad chest, squeezed the firing stud.

Then a great paralysis seemed to fill his rangy body. He came to a dead stop, his guns still jutting before him, but utterly without the will to press the firing studs.

"Holster both guns, Denton," Jim Palmer barked.

Instantly, without a word, the trouble shooter's hands flicked the twin guns back into their sheaths. He stood rigidly, great veins ridging his temples, then all resistance went from his body as he waited for the other to approach.

JIM PALMER halted but a few feet from the trouble shooter, the leather strap dangling from his right hand, his feet wide-braced. He bent forward a trifle, stared directly in Don Denton's eyes.

"Can you hear me, Denton?" he asked quietly.

Don Denton fought the unbreakable control that held his mind and body in complete abeyance. Veins stood in high relief on his forehead, and perspiration rolled down his cheeks. He gagged a bit from the noxious air, tried to turn his head from Palmer's piercing gaze.

"I can hear you, Palmer," he said woodenly.

"Fine." There was still that *something* far back in Palmer's eyes, but there was absolutely no expression on his face. "Now, this is what you are to do: You will act as the pilot on the Moonstone for the rest of us men. We are turning pirates, and intend to set up our headquarters here. You will get your instruments and whatever else you need from your ship; we leave within the hour."

Don Denton turned without volition, and even the hypnotic control that directed him could not keep the gasp of astonishment from his throat.

For there on the edge of the clearing, exactly as they had been before, were the

two freighters that had vanished so mysteriously thirty minutes before.

But the astonishment was immediately erased from his mind, and he turned robot-like toward the *Comet*. He caught one flashing glimpse of the emotionless faces of the men and Jean Palmer, then he paced slowly toward the gaping port of the scouter.

Jim Palmer walked quietly at his side, staring straight ahead, no emotion touching his ruddy features.

Don Denton tried to think, but a soft impenetrable band of nothingness seemed to absorb all of his thoughts. His only thought was of the command he had just received, and, strangely, that thought seemed to be a perfectly natural thing.

"You go in first, Denton," Palmer said quietly.

The trouble shooter obeyed silently, climbing through, standing rigidly until the other had joined him. Then he turned, stepped forward. His breath whooshed in a startled gasp, as his right foot stepped squarely on the dropped oxy-helmet, and then he was falling forward, his hands outstretched in a futile effort to regain his balance.

He felt his head strike the wall, struggled vainly to get back to his feet. Then dull blackness wiped all consciousness from his brain.

IV

HE COULDN'T have been out for more than a second. He blinked his eyes shook his head slightly when he saw the tiny box of the gravity-rotor over his head, shifted a bit so that he gazed squarely at Jim Palmer.

He laughed then, feeling the tight control-band gone from his mind, sensing the advantage that had come back to him. He twisted a bit, still not understanding all that had happened, and his mouth opened in surprise at what he saw.

There were two of them, two grub-like slugs resting quiescently on the metal floor, each of them the exact duplicate of the thing he had shot upon landing on Venus.

All of the maelstrom disappeared then from his mind, and his thinking grew crystal clear. He saw Jim Palmer bending toward him, and then the ati-guns were

in his hands, and their wailing crescendos of unleashed power filled the *Comet* with screaming echoes.

For an interminable instant, the slugs seemed to absorb the ati-rays, then they collapsed into puddles of obscene flesh that disappeared into charred flakes of ash.

Don Denton lay where he was, the guns silent in his hands, seeing the intelligence that flashed into Jim Palmer's eyes.

"Oh, my God!" Jim Palmer said stupidly, stared at the strap he still held in his heavy hand.

Don Denton rolled from beneath the gravity-rotor, came to his feet, dodged around the dazed man, tugged open the nearest panel in the wall. He took two small, belt gravity-rotors from a shelf, handed one to Palmer, buckled the other about his head.

"Put that rotor about your head, Palmer," he ordered, "We've got some work to do."

He switched on his own rotor, felt nausea cramp at his stomach when the gravity field pulled at his neck muscles. Hooking his foot beneath the ship's rotor, he helped Palmer fasten the rotor over his greyed hair, then handed the older man one of the ati-guns.

"Come on," he said, "We've got some hunting to do."

He led the way, jumping from the port-door, the gun blasting in his hand, conscious of the *Lanka* manager's bulky body at his side.

They went side by side down the field, the wailing roar of their guns screaming in the air, the slugs dying hideously, one by one.

And then Jean was in Don Denton's arms, her slender shoulders shaking in a torrent of sobs, and he was soothing her with a clumsy gentleness that felt strange and good to him.

THEY sat in the control room of the great freighter, *Moonstone*, their faces were turned to where Don Denton stood at the control panel. The trouble shooter grinned at the fifteen people that made up his audience, and he summed up all of his thoughts and theories.

"Those slugs," he explained, "were little more than animated brains. They lived somewhere in the oceans, and probably

discovered the *Lanka* camps by accident. They had no ways of subduing you men by physical means, because of their grub-like bodies, so they took control of your minds. Unluckily, they failed to gain control of one of you men and of both of the freighter pilots; and the three men tried to escape in a small rocket. The rocket crashed, killing all three of the men."

Jim Palmer nodded. "That's what I've got figured out," he said, "But I've just got a hazy memory of the past three months."

"Well," Don Denton continued, "these slugs must have got the idea of going to Earth and the other inhabited planets, and taking control of them. But they needed your help and a space pilot to transport you and them. They put all of you in a cataleptic state, while waiting for some space pilot to appear. They left a guard, the slug I shot down the moment I began searching the camp. But before he died, he sent out a call that brought a single slug into camp."

Jean Palmer shivered, held tightly to the trouble shooter's hand. "I know," she said, "I took off my helmet to adjust the oxygen valve, and I looked up to see that whitish thing at the corner of the hut. Before I could call out, something seemed to grab my mind—and then I was running toward the jungle. I tried to scream to you, when you found me gone, but I couldn't move."

Don Denton smiled, tightened his strong fingers over the girl's. "It's fairly easy to reconstruct from there on," he said carefully, "The slugs tried to get control of my mind. But because thought is of an electrical nature, absolute control wouldn't pass through the copper of my oxy-helmet. They set a scene to make me think I was crazy, and sent Palmer to take off my helmet."

"I remember that," Jim Palmer said thoughtfully.

Don Denton nodded. "Well," he went on, "their mental control was enough that it played tricks with my mind. They blanked out my vision when I looked at them, and later, they blacked out the sight of the freighters, trying to make me think that I was so crazy I should take off my helmet for an examination."

"I escaped from Palmer, went back to

the *Comet*, then raced out of the ship to save Jean from a beating." He shook his head slightly when he saw the pain on Palmer's face. "Of course it was just a trick to get me outside without my helmet. Well, I fell for it; and the slugs took control, making me believe that Jim Palmer was the master mind engineering everything. But on entering the *Comet*, I slipped and fell beneath the ship's gravity-rotor. The field of gravity-energy neutralized the electricity of the thought waves—just as it blanks out the power of a flashlight—and I was able to think again. I blasted the slugs, got two portable rotors and fastened them to Palmer and myself, and the two of us cleaned out the slugs."

Don Denton flicked his gaze about the room. "Now, if you men intend to stay, you've got to wear tiny gravity-rotors on your heads. It apparently isn't the quantity of power put out that blankets the thought waves, it's possible to use a very weak power. I don't think the slugs will try anything again, but if they do, you shouldn't have any trouble getting rid of them."

"We're staying on," Jim Palmer said grimly, nodded approvingly at the confident glances given him by his men, "And I hope those damned things show up again. I'd like nothing better than to take an anti-blaster to a bunch of those uncanny devils."

He grinned suddenly, looked squarely into Don Denton's eyes.

"How about staying on for awhile?" he asked, "There might be a little excitement on this planet that you could dig up?"

Don Denton shook his head. "Sorry," he said, "but I've got a date with some friends of mine on Mars; we're going to explore some of the new tombs they discovered two months ago. I guess I'll be getting along."

He felt the insistent tugging of Jean's slender fingers on his. A smile lifted the corners of his lips, and he bent over, kissed her with a quick possessiveness.

"My mistake," he said warmly, "we'll be getting along!"

He and Jean were smiling into each other's eyes then, reading there a future that held many promises of adventure and love and—and things that would be utterly nothing to others than themselves.

THE HAIRY ONES

by BASIL WELLS

Marooned on a world within a world, aided by a slim girl and an old warrior, Patrolman Sisko Rolf was fighting his greatest battle —to bring life to dying Mars.

Illustration by POTTER

"THE OUTLAW ships are attacking!" Old Garmon Nash's harsh voice snapped like a thunderclap in the cramped rocket flyer's cabin. "Five or six of them. Cut the searchlights!"

Sisko Rolf's stocky body was a blur of motion as he cut the rocket jets, doused the twin searchlights, and switched over to the audio beams that served so well on the surface when blind flying was in order. But here in the cavern world, thirty-seventh in the linked series of vast caves that underlie the waterless wastes of Mars, the reflected waves of sound were of little value. Distances were far too cramped—disaster might loom but a few hundred feet away.

"Trapped us neatly," Rolf said through clenched teeth. "Tolled into their underground hideout by that water-runner we tried to capture. We can't escape, that's certain. They know these caverns better than. . . . We'll down some of them, though."

"Right!" That was old Garmon Nash, his fellow patrolman aboard the Planet Patrol ship as he swung the deadly slimness of his rocket blast's barrel around to center on the fiery jets that betrayed the approaching outlaw flyers.

Three times he fired the gun, the rocket projectiles blasting off with their invisible preliminary jets of gas, and three times an enemy craft flared up into an intolerable torch of flame before they realized the patrol ship had fired upon them. Then a barrage of enemy rocket shells exploded into life above and before them.

Rolf swung the lax controls over hard as the bursts of fire revealed a looming barrier of stone dead ahead, and then he felt the tough skin of the flyer crumple inward. The cabin seemed to telescope about him. In a slow sort of wonder Rolf felt the scrape of rock against metal, and then the screeching of air through the myriad

rents in the cabin's meralloy walls grew to a mad whining wail.

Down plunged the battered ship, downward ever downward. Somehow Rolf found the strength to wrap his fingers around the control levers and snap on a quick burst from the landing rockets. Their mad speed checked momentarily, but the nose of the vertically plunging ship dissolved into an inferno of flame.

The ship struck; split open like a rotten squash, and Rolf felt himself being flung far outward through thick blackness. For an eternity it seemed he hung in the darkness before something smashed the breath and feeling from his nerveless body. With a last glimmer of sanity he knew that he lay crushed against a rocky wall.

MUCH LATER Rolf groaned with the pain of bruised muscles and tried to rise. To his amazement he could move all his limbs. Carefully he came to his knees and so to his feet. Not a bone was broken, unless the sharp breathlessness that strained at his chest meant cracked ribs.

There was light in the narrow pit in which he found himself, light and heat from the yet-glowing debris of the rocket flyer. The outlaws had blasted the crashed ship, his practiced eyes told him, and Garmon Nash must have died in the wreckage. He was alone in the waterless trap of a deep crevice.

In the fading glow of the super-heated metal the vertical walls above mocked him. There could be no ascent from this natural prison-pit, and even if there were he could never hope to reach the surface forty miles and more overhead. The floors of the thirty-seven caves through which they had so carefully jetted were a splintered, creviced series of canyon-like wastes, and as he ascended the rarefied atmosphere of the higher levels would spell death.



The expoder hammered in Rolf's heavy fist.

Rolf laughed. Without a pressure mask on the surface of Mars an Earthman was licked. Without water and food certain death grinned in his face, for beyond the sand-buried entrance to these lost equatorial caves there were no pressure domes for hundreds of miles. Here at least the air was thick enough to support life, and somewhere nearby the outlaws who smuggled their precious contraband water into the water-starved domes of North Mars lay hidden.

The young patrolman unzipped his jacket pocket and felt for the emergency concentrate bars that were standard equipment. Half of the oval bar he crushed between his teeth, and when the concentrated energy flooded into his muscles he set off around the irregular wall of the pit.

He found the opening less than ten paces from the starting point, an empty cavity higher than a man and half as wide. The glow from the gutted ship was failing

and he felt for the solar torch that hugged flatly against his hip. He uncapped the torch and the miniature sun glowed redly from its lensed prison to reveal the rocky corridor stretching out ahead.

LIGHT! How many hours later it was when the first faint glow of white light reached his eyes Rolf did not know—it had seemed an eternity of endless plodding along that smooth-floored descending tunnel.

Rolf capped the solar torch. No use wasting the captive energy needlessly he reasoned. And he loosened the expoder in its holster as he moved carefully forward. The outlaw headquarters might be close ahead, headquarters where renegade Frogs, Venusians from the southern sunken marshes of Mars, and Eearthmen from dusty North Mars, concealed their precious hoard of water from the thirsty colonists of North Mars.

"They may have found the sunken seas of Mars," thought Rolf as he moved alertly forward, "water that would give the mining domes new life." His fists clenched dryly. "Water that should be free!"

Then the light brightened before him as he rounded a shouldering wall of smoothly trimmed stone, and the floor fell away beneath his feet! He found himself shooting downward into a vast void that glowed softly with a mysterious all-pervading radiance.

His eyes went searching out, out into undreamed distance. For miles below him there was nothing but emptiness, and for miles before him there was that same glowing vacancy. Above the cavern's roof soared majestically upward; he could see the narrow dark slit through which his feet had betrayed him, and he realized that he had fallen through the vaulted rocky dome of this fantastic abyss.

It was then, even as he snapped the release of his spinner and the nested blades spun free overhead, that he saw the slowly turning bulk of the cloud-swathed world, a tiny five mile green ball of a planet!

The weird globe was divided equally into hemispheres, and as the tiny world turned between its confining columns a green, lake-dotted half alternated with a blasted, splintered black waste of rocky desert. As the spinner dropped him slowly down into

the vast emptiness of the great shining gulf, Rolf could see that a broad band of stone divided the green fertile plains and forests from the desolate desert wastes of the other half. Toward this barrier the spinner bore him, and Rolf was content to let it move in that direction—from the heights of the wall he could scout out the country beyond.

The wall expanded as he came nearer to the pygmy planet. The spinner had slowed its speed; it seemed to Rolf that he must be falling free in space for a time, but the feeble gravity of the tiny world tugged at him more strongly as he neared the wall. And the barrier became a jumbled mass of roughly-dressed stone slabs, from whose earth-filled crevices sprouted green life.

So slowly was the spinner dropping that the blackened desolation of the other hemisphere came sliding up beneath his boots. He looked down into great gashes in the blackness of the desert and saw there the green of sunken oases and watered canyons. He drifted slowly toward the opposite loom of the mysterious wall with a swift wind off the desert behind him.

A hundred yards from the base of the rocky wall his feet scraped through black dust, and he came to a stop. Deftly Rolf nested the spinners again in their pack before he set out toward the heaped-up mass of stone blocks that was the wall.

Ten steps he took before an excited voice called out shrilly from the rocks ahead. Rolf's slitted gray eyes narrowed yet more and his hand dropped to the compact expoder machine-gun holstered at his hip. There was the movement of a dark shape behind the screen of vines and ragged bushes.

"Down, Altha," a deeper voice rumbled from above, "it's one of the Enemy."

The voice had spoken in English! Rolf took a step forward eagerly and then doubt made his feet falter. There were Earthmen as well as Frogs among the outlaws. This mysterious world that floated above the cavern floor might be their headquarters.

"But, Mark," the voice that was now unmistakably feminine argued, "he wears the uniform of a patrolman."

"May be a trick." The deep voice was doubtful. "You know their leader, Cannon,

wanted you. This may be a trick to join the Outcasts and kidnap you."

The girl's voice was merry. "Come on Spider-legs," she said.

ROLF found himself staring, open-mouthed, at the sleek-limbed vision that parted the bushes and came toward him. A beautiful woman she was, with the long burnished copper of her hair down around her waist, but beneath the meager shortness of the skin tunic he saw that her firm flesh was covered with a fine reddish coat of hair. Even her face was sleek and gleaming with its coppery covering of down.

"Hello, patrol-a-man," she said shyly.

An elongated pencil-ray of a man bounced nervously out to her side. "Altha," he scolded, scrubbing at his reddened bald skull with a long-fingered hand, "why do you never listen to me? I promised your father I'd look after you." He hitched at his tattered skin robe.

The girl laughed, a low liquid sound that made Rolf's heart pump faster. "This Mark Tanner of mine," she explained to the patrolman, "is always afraid for me. He does not remember that I can see into the minds of others."

She smiled again as Rolf's face slowly reddened. "Do not be ashamed," she said. "I am not angry that you think I am—well, not too unattractive."

Rolf threw up the mental block that was the inheritance from his grueling years of training on Earth Base. His instructors there had known that a few gifted mortals possess the power of a limited telepathy, and the secrets of the Planet Patrol must be guarded.

"That is better, perhaps." The girl's face was demure. "And now perhaps you will visit us in the safety of the vaults of ancient Aryk."

"Sorry," said the tall man as Rolf sprang easily from the ground to their side. "I'm always forgetting the mind-reading abilities of the Hairy People."

"She one of them?" Rolf's voice was low, but he saw Altha's lip twitch.

"Mother was." Mark Tanner's voice was louder. "Father was Wayne Stark. Famous explorer you know. I was his assistant."

"Sure." Rolf nodded. "Lost in equatorial

wastelands—uh, about twenty years ago—2053, I believe."

"Only we were not lost on the surface," explained Tanner, his booming voice much too powerful for his reedy body. "Wayne Stark was searching for the lost seas of Mars. Traced them underground. Found them too." He paused to look nervously out across the blasted wasteland.

"We ran out of fuel here on Lomihi," he finished, "with the vanished surface waters of Mars less than four miles beneath us."

Rolf followed the direction of the other's pale blue eyes. Overhead now hung the bottom of the cavern. An almost circular island of pale yellow lifted above the restless dark waters of a vast sea. Rolf realized with a wrench of sudden fear that they actually hung head downward like flies walking across a ceiling.

"There," roared Tanner's voice, "is one of the seas of Mars."

"One," repeated Rolf slowly, "You mean there are more?"

"Dozens of them," the older man's voice throbbed with helpless rage. "Enough to make the face of Mars green again. Cavern after cavern lies beyond this first one, their floors flooded with water."

Rolf felt new strength pump into his tired bruised muscles. Here lay the salvation of Earth's thirsting colonies almost within reach. Once he could lead the scientists of North Mars to this treasure trove of water. . . .

"Mark!" The girl's voice was tense. Rolf felt her arm tug at his sleeve and he dropped beside her in the shelter of a clump of coarse-leaved gray bushes. "The Furry Women attack!"

A HUNDRED paces away Rolf made the dark shapes of armed warriors as they filed downward from the Barrier into the blackened desolation of the desert half of Lomihi.

"Enemies?" he whispered to Mark Tanner hoarsely.

"Right." The older man was slipping the stout bowstring into its notched recess on the upper end of his long bow. "They cross the Barrier from the fertile plains of Nyd to raid the Hairy People. They take them for slaves."

"I must warn them." Altha's lips

thinned and her brown-flecked eyes flamed.

"The outlaws may capture," warned Tanner. "They have taken over the canyons of Gur and Norpar remember."

"I will take the glider." Altha was on her feet, her body crouched over to take advantage of the sheltering shrubs. She threaded her way swiftly back along a rocky corridor in the face of the Barrier toward the ruins of ancient Aryk.

Tanner shrugged his shoulders. "What can I do? Altha has the blood of the Hairy People in her veins. She will warn them even though the outlaws have turned her people against her."

Rolf watched the column of barbarically clad warriors file out upon the barren desert and swing to the right along the base of the Barrier. Spear tips and bared swords glinted dully.

"They will pass within a few feet!" he hissed.

"Right." Tanner's fingers bit into Rolf's arm. "Pray that the wind does not shift, their nostrils are sensitive as those of the weasels they resemble."

Rolf's eyes slitted. There was something vaguely unhuman about those gracefully marching figures. He wondered what Tanner had meant by calling them weasels, wondered until they came closer.

Then he knew. Above half naked feminine bodies, sinuous and supple as the undulating coils of a serpent, rose the snaky ditigrade head of a weasel-brute! Their necks were long and wide, merging into the gray-furred muscles of their narrow bodies until they seemed utterly shoulderless, and beneath their furry pelts the ripples of smooth-flowing muscles played rhythmically. There was a stench, a musky penetrating scent that made the flesh of his body crawl.

"See!" Tanner's voice was muted. "Giffa, Queen of the Furry Ones!"

Borne on a carved and polished litter of ebony-hued wood and yellowed bone lolled the hideous queen of that advancing horde. Gaunt of body she was, her scarred gray-furred hide hanging loose upon her breastless frame. One eye was gone but the other gleamed, black and beady, from her narrow earless skull. And the skulls of rodents and men alike linked together into ghastly festoons about her heavy, short-legged litter.

Men bore the litter, eight broad-shouldered red-haired men whose arms had been cut off at the shoulders and whose naked backs bore the weals of countless lashes. Their bodies, like that of Altha, were covered with a silky coat of reddish hair.

Rolf raised his expoder, red anger clouding his eyes as he saw these maimed beasts of burden, but the hand of Mark Tanner pressed down firmly across his arm. The older man shook his head.

"Not yet," he said. "When Altha has warned the Hairy People we can cut off their retreat. After they have passed I will arouse the Outcasts who live here upon the Barrier. Though their blood is that of the two races mingled they hate the Furry Ones."

A shadow passed over their hiding place. The Furry Amazons too saw the indistinct darkness and looked up. High overhead drifted the narrow winged shape of a glider, and the warrior women shrieked their hatred. Gone now was their chance for a surprise attack on the isolated canyons of the Hairy People.

They halted, clustered about their leader. Giffa snarled quick orders at them, her chisel-teeth clicking savagely. The column swung out into the wasteland toward the nearest sunken valleys of the Hairy People. Rolf and Mark Tanner came to their feet.

Abruptly, then, the wind veered. From behind the two Earthmen it came, bearing the scent of their bodies out to the sensitive nostrils of the beast-women. Again the column turned. They glimpsed the two men and a hideous scrawling battle-cry burst from their throats.

ROLF'S expoder rattled briefly like a high-speed sewing machine as he flicked its muzzle back and forth along the ranks of attacking Furry Ones. Dozens of the hideous weasel creatures fell as the needles of explosive blasted them but hundreds more were swarming over their fallen sisters. Mark Tanner's bow twanged again and again as he drove arrows at the bloodthirsty warrior women. But the Furry Ones ran fearlessly into that rain of death.

Tanner smashed an elbow into Rolf's side. "Retreat!" he gasped.

The Furry Amazons swarmed up over the lower terraces of rocks, their snaky heads thrust forward and their swords slashing. The two Earthmen bounded up and backward to the next jumbled layer of giant blocks behind them, their powerful earthly muscles negating Lomihi's feeble gravity. Spears showered thick about them and then they dropped behind the sheltering bulk of a rough square boulder.

"Now where?" Rolf snapped another burst of expoder needles at the furry attackers as he asked.

"To the vaults beneath the Forbidden City," Mark Tanner cried. "None but the Outcasts and we two have entered the streets of deserted Aryk."

The bald scientist slung his bow over his head and one shoulder and went bounding away along a shadowy crevice that plunged raggedly into the heart of the Barrier. Rolf blasted another spurt of explosive needles at the Furry Ones and followed.

DARKNESS thickened as they penetrated into the maze of the Barrier's shattered heart. An unseen furry shape sprang upon Rolf's shoulders and as he sank to his knees he felt hot saliva drip like acid upon his neck. His fist sent the attacker's bulk smashing against the rocky floor before fangs or claws could rip at his tender flesh, and he heard a choked snarl that ended convulsively in silence.

Bat-winged blobs of life dragged wet leathery hide across his face, and beneath his feet slimy wriggling things crushed into quivering pulp. Then there was faint light again, and the high-vaulted roof of a rock dungeon rose above him.

Mark Tanner was peering out a slitted embrasure that overlooked the desolate land of the Hairy People.

Tanner's finger pointed. "Altha!" Rolf saw the graceful wings of the glider riding the thermals back toward the Barrier. "She had warned the Hairy People, and now she returns."

"The weasel heads won't follow us here?" asked Rolf.

Tanner laughed. "Hardly. They fear the spirits of the Ancients too much for that. They believe the invisible powers will drink their souls."

"Then how about telling me about this hanging world?"

"Simply the whim of an ancient Martian ruler. As I have learned from the inscriptions and metal tablets here in Aryk he could not conquer all of Mars so he created a world that would be all his own."

Rolf laughed. "Like the pleasure globes of the wealthy on Earth."

"Right." Tanner kept his eyes on the enlarging winged shape of Altha's flyer as he spoke. "Later, when the nations of Mars began draining off the seas and hoarding them in their underground caverns, Lomihi became a fortress for the few thousand aristocrats and slaves who escaped the surface wars.

"The Hairy People were the rulers," he went on, "and the Furry Ones were their slaves. In the revolt that eventually split Lomihi into two warring races this city, Aryk, was destroyed by a strange vegetable blight and the ancient knowledge was lost to both races."

"But," Rolf frowned thoughtfully, "what keeps Lomihi from crashing into the island? Surely the two columns at either end cannot support it?"

"The island is the answer," said Tanner. "Somehow it blocks the force of gravity—shields Lomihi from. . . ." He caught his breath suddenly.

"The outlaws!" he cried. "They're after Altha."

Rolf caught a glimpse of a sleek rocket flyer diving upon Altha's frail wing. He saw the girl go gliding steeply down toward a ragged jumble of volcanic spurs and pits and disappear from view. He turned to see the old man pushing another crudely constructed glider toward the outer wall of the rock chamber.

Tanner tugged at a silvery metal bar inset into the stone wall. A section of the wall swung slowly inward. Rolf sprang to his side.

"Let me follow," he said. "I can fly a glider, and I have my expoder."

The older man's eyes were hot. He jerked at Rolf's hands and then suddenly thought better of it. "You're right," he agreed. "Help her if you can. Your weapon is our only hope now."

Rolf pushed up and outward with all the strength of his weary muscles. The glider knifed forward with that first swift im-

petus, and drove out over the Barrier. The Furry Ones were struggling insect shapes below him, and he saw with a thrill that larger bodied warriors, whose bodies glinted with a dull bronze, were attacking them from the burnt-out wastelands. The Hairy People had come to battle the invaders.

He guided the frail wing toward the shattered badlands where the girl had taken shelter, noting as he did so that the rocket flyer had landed near its center in a narrow strip of rocky gulch. A sudden thought made him grin. He drove directly toward the grounded ship. With this rocket flyer he could escape from Lomihi, return through the thirty-seven caverns to the upper world, and give to thirsty Mars the gift of limitless water again.

A MAN stood on guard just outside the flyer's oval door. Rolf lined up his expoder and his jaw tensed. He guided the tiny soarer closer with one hand. If he could crash the glider into the guard, well and good. There would be no explosion of expoder needles to warn the fellow's comrades. But if the outlaw saw him Rolf knew that he would be the first to fire—his was the element of surprise.

A score of feet lay between them, and suddenly the outlaw whirled about. Rolf pressed the firing button; the expoder clicked over once and the trimmer key jammed, and the doughy-faced Venusian swung up his own long-barreled expoder!

Rolf snapped his weapon overhand at the Frog's hairless skull. The fish-bellied alien ducked but his expoder swung off the target momentarily. In that instant Rolf launched himself from the open framework of the slowly diving glider, full upon the Venusian.

They went down, Rolf swinging his fist like a hammer. He felt the Frog go limp and he loosed a relieved whistle. Now with a rocket flyer and the guard's rifle expoder in his grasp the problem of escape from the inner caverns was solved. He would rescue the girl, stop at the Forbidden City for Mark Tanner, and blast off for the upper crust forty miles and more overhead.

He knelt over the prostrate Venusian, using his belt and a strip torn from his greenish tunic to bind the unconscious

man. The knots were not too tight, the man could free himself in the course of a few hours. He shrugged his shoulders wearily and started to get up.

A foot scraped on stone behind him. He spun on bent knees and flung himself fifty feet to the further side of the narrow gulch with the same movement. Expoder needles splintered the rocks about him as he dropped behind a sheltering rocky ledge, and he caught a glimpse of two green-clad men dragging the bronze-haired body of the girl he had come to save into the shelter of the flyer.

A green bulge showed around the polished fuselage and Rolf pressed his captured weapon's firing button. A roar of pain came from the wounded man, and he saw an outflung arm upon the rocky ground that clenched tightly twice and relaxed to move no more. The outlaw weapon must have been loaded with a drum of poisoned needles, the expoder needles had not blasted a vital spot in the man's body.

The odds were evening, he thought triumphantly. There might be another outlaw somewhere out there in the badlands, but no more than that. The flyer was built to accommodate no more than five passengers and four was the usual number. He shifted his expoder to cover the opposite end of the ship's squat fuselage.

And something that felt like a mountain smashed into his back. He was crushed downward, breathless, his eyes glimpsing briefly the soiled greenish trousers of his attacker as they locked on either side of his neck, and then blackness engulfed him as a mighty sledge battered endlessly at his skull.

THIS SLEDGE was hammering relentlessly as Rolf sensed his first glimmer of returning light. There were two sledges, one of them that he identified as the hammering of blood in his throbbing temples, and the other the measured blasting pulse of rocket jets. He opened his eyes slowly to find himself staring at the fine-crusted metal plates of a flyer's deck. His nose was grinding into the oily muck that only undisciplined men would have permitted to accumulate.

Cautiously his head twisted until he

could look forward toward the controls. The bound body of Altha Stark faced him, and he saw her lips twist into a brief smile of recognition. She shook her head and frowned as he moved his arm. But Rolf had learned that his limbs were not bound—apparently the outlaws had considered him out of the blasting for the moment.

By degrees Rolf worked his arm down to his belt where his solar torch was hooked. His fingers made careful adjustments within the inset base of the torch, pushing a lever here and adjusting a tension screw there.

The ship bumped gently as it landed and the thrum of rockets ceased. The cabin shifted with the weight of bodies moving from their seats. Rolf heard voices from a distance and the answering triumphant bawling of his two captors. The moment had come. He turned the cap of the solar torch away from his body and freed it.

Heat blasted at his body as the stepped-up output of the torch made the oily floor flame. He lay unmoving while the thick smoke rolled over him.

"Fire!" There was panic in the outlaw's voice. Rolf came to his knees in the blanketing fog and looked forward.

One of the men flung himself out the door, but the other reached for the extinguisher close at hand. His thoughts were on the oily smoke; not on the prisoners, and so the impact of Rolf's horizontally propelled body drove the breath from his lungs before his hand could drop to his belted expoder.

The outlaw was game. His fists slammed back at Rolf, and his knees jolted upward toward the patrolman's vulnerable middle. But Rolf bored in, his own knotted hands pumping, and his trained body weaving instinctively aside from the crippling blows aimed at his body. For a moment they fought, coughing and choking from the thickening pall of smoke, and then the fingers of the outlaw clamped around Rolf's throat and squeezed hard.

The patrolman was weary; the wreck in the upper cavern and the long trek afterward through the dark tunnels had sapped his strength, and now he felt victory slipping from his grasp.

He felt something soft bump against his legs, legs so far below that he could hardly realize that they were his, and then he was falling with the relentless fingers still about his throat. As from a great distant he heard a cry of pain and the blessed air gulped into his raw throat. His eyes cleared.

He saw Altha's bound body and head. Her jaws were clamped upon the arm of the outlaw and even as he fought for more of the reeking smoky air of the cabin he saw the man's clenched fist batter at her face. Rolf swung, all the weight of his stocky body behind the blow, and the outlaw thudded limply against the opposite wall of the little cabin.

No time to ask the girl if she were injured. The patrolman flung himself into the spongy control chair's cushions and sent the ship rocketing skyward. Behind him the thin film of surface oil no longer burned and the conditioning unit was clearing the air.

"Patrolman," the girl's voice was beside him. "We're safe!"

"Everything bongo?" Rolf wanted to know.

"Of course," she smiled crookedly.

"Glad of that." Rolf felt the warmth of her body so close beside him. A sudden strange restlessness came with the near contact.

Altha smiled shyly and winced with pain. "Do you know," she said, "even yet I do not know your name."

Rolf grinned up at her. "Need to?" he asked.

The girl's eyes widened. A responsive spark blazed in them. "Handier than calling you *Shorty* all the time," she quipped.

Then they were over the Barrier and Rolf saw the last of the beaten Furry Ones racing back across the great wall toward the Plains of Nyd. He nosed the captured ship down toward the ruined plaza of the Forbidden City. Once Mark Tanner was aboard they would blast surfaceward with their thrilling news that all Mars could have water in plenty again.

Rolf snorted. "Shorty," he said distastefully as they landed, but his arm went out toward the girl's red-haired slimness, and curved around it.

Colony of the Unfit

by MANFRED A. CARTER

Mars had become the prison planet for Earth's afflicted, for the Leaders had exiled them to a living death beneath its red surface. But the Leaders had erred in their cold-blooded calculations—Mars held a secret beyond their ken.

Illustration by DOOLIN





The shot exploded in a burst of light.

JOHN GREELY looked at Hilda's freshly gloved, artificial hand, as she adjusted her note book to a clip concealed in the palm. The hand fascinated him horribly. Beauty should never be crippled. She sensed his morbid stare, but smiled and rose gracefully, saying, "O.K., Boss. Let's go."

She flashed bantering eyes at her editor, with a last pat of her heavily ringed right hand on the rich rolling waves of blonde hair that were always in place. The

startling pale beauty of her young face was contrasted by glowing dark brown eyes. Theirs was a comfortable friendship, this of the young editor and his society staff and secretary, but a limited one. He said, gruffly, "Let me carry the radi-type."

"No, you're the dignity, I'm the beast of burden. Come on, hurry! We've only five minutes to reach the district hospital."

John slipped on his transparent all-weather coat and helped Hilda with hers.

His reddish brown hair flipped in the March wind as they stepped out from the *Daily Home Recorder* building. His almost boyishly round cheeks glowed with color. Hilda liked the way his shoulders snapped up as he faced the cold. She liked the way he took her arm, but she must always be casual. . . .

"Do you suppose it's just another rumor?" she asked, as they stepped into a low, cigar shaped car.

"Look like straight dope to me. The Universal News Service is pretty conservative."

"How could things have changed so while we were away? It doesn't seem like the same world. Those men in Washington must be mad."

"I know, Hilda, but perhaps we are the ones who are out out of step. This is the day of directed evolution."

"But, John—how horrible, to take all those sick folks and banish them on a Space Tramp!"

John drove past the old wooden houses of their small city and then let out speed on the highway before he answered, "The Leader says that is what we should do—harden our emotions for the sake of a better race. You and I are in the minority. Those years on the Moon trip have left us out of date."

They were silent for a little while before she continued, "Do you suppose we really are in the minority? The people who listen in to our raditype service seem just about as they did before we went away. Their letters prove that. I saw an old lady's scrap book the other day, of her clippings. I read it through because I had been wondering how much of the printed recording was ever reread. Most people are content to glance at the screen when the news first comes on. She had saved the old type sentimental items, just as an old lady would have five or ten years ago."

"Yes, the small towns are slow to change. That's why they hate the little news services like ours. Prepared news hastens the new day."

"Do you suppose they'll talk to us?"

"They'll have to," he said grimly, "with all those folks watching and listening in. I wonder what the patients think about the new idea—or if they know."

"Where do you think they will be sent?"

Why don't the authorities just put them to sleep with a lethal drug?"

"Search me, Honey. Well, here we are."

Their street roller drew up silently before a huge gray building in the open country and John turned the magnetic parking control. They stepped out from the grass-lined curb, and John pushed the moving sidewalk half-speed handle, sliding them quickly up to an entrance. It opened automatically and in a moment they were standing before a large silver reception screen.

A white haired doctor, in his long surgical gown, glowed rapidly into focus before them. His eyes darted at John like the incision of a lancet. "What's the press want this morning?"

"We'd like an interview on the Universe News story."

Hilda held her raditype transmitter open toward the screen, secure in the crook of her arm, while she made private stenographic notes on the pad. Every home in the Brownville Section, which happened to be tuned in, was seeing the Doctor and he suddenly realized it enough to smile slightly. He inwardly cursed the freedom of the press in small towns, but remarked with forced graciousness, "I'll have a nurse conduct you to the surgery. We can talk while I supervise some minor operations."

"Fine!"

THEY walked past the Mental Case Wards in silence. It had been fifty years since the most degenerate of these poor unfortunates had been allowed to vociferate their wild discords. Hypnosis and drugs had achieved permanent quiet at last, but there was still a low percentage of actual cures.

Beyond these wards they came to the surgical division, and presently sat with Dr. Henderson in a small circular screened room, where a dozen operations were simultaneously shown. He hardly glanced at them, but kept his eyes constantly on the moving screen before him, touching buttons occasionally before making some brief comment into the transmitter.

John ignored his seeming lack of attention. "What about this story that the Central Medical Division is moving all these patients out on a space ship?"

"Some wild rumor—nothing in it."

"Any objection to our taking a round of observation?"

"No, go ahead. Might as well do it now. We can finish the interview later. I want to concentrate on that brain section transfer. It's rather tricky."

They stepped into an observation car and slid slowly around the overhead track, looking down on crowded wards below.

"John! There is something happening here. Look at the patients' faces. They're afraid."

"Does seem to be a lot of activity."

"Let's slide down into that convalescent ward and see what they have to say."

"O.K., Sister, but you know it is forbidden. We'll probably get thrown out and reported."

They had hardly stepped out of the slide when a group of white gowned orderlies came down the next corridor. Hilda saw them and whispered tensely. "Here! Sit in this wheel chair, and I'll visit you—Help me fold our coats so that you can sit on them."

John obeyed and lolled back in the chair, winking at her before he half closed his eyes.

The orderlies wheeled in a low carrier, piled high with transparent plastic overcoats, old fashioned sweaters, woolen mackinaws, and rubber raincoats—any sort of an outdated covering. Most of the patients in these district hospitals were poor, and largely living in the meager comforts of the early part of the century. They made no protest, but donned their variegated assortment of coverings and lined up obediently to march out.

"Let's go with them," Hilda whispered.

"Quick! Behind those screens and into the end of the line," he directed, "the press joins the army of decrepitude."

"John, there are hundreds of ambulance planes outside!"

"Got your transmitter on?"

"Yes, it's been on all the time."

A white faced man ahead of them began to struggle between two guards as they reached the open air. A male nurse, walking behind them, deftly thrust a large hypodermic into the patient's arm, while the orderlies held him and pushed back his sleeve. The rebellious one quieted and was carried into one of the planes,

There were a few other struggles of re-

sistance. Here and there a patient ran a few yards before being caught and subdued. For the most part the unhappy crowd showed only a quiet despairing obedience.

John urged in a low worried tone, "Let's make a dash for our roller—this is no place for you."

"No, this is horrible—we must see it through. Pretend to be sick and go along."

"Don't be sentimental, Hilda. Get ready to run for it when we pass that wall." He took her right hand in his left and snapped off the raditype. "Now!"

She had no choice, but, as they ran around the corner of the wall, they crashed into a group of surgeons coming toward the planes.

"Hold them!" cried Dr. Henderson. "They've done damage enough already. Put them on a plane. Perhaps we can claim the first broadcast was an impersonation, if they are gone."

John broke one pair of spectacles and started one nosebleed dripping down a doctor's immaculate gown, but muscles haven't much chance against the rigidity serum. He yielded to the hypodermic and did not come to during the brief ambulance ride, nor while they were being loaded onto the battered old Space Tramp. Hilda continued to scribble her antiquated shorthand surreptitiously on the pad, but they had appropriated her raditype. She was not given the rigidity serum until she was strapped onto a sleeping shelf in the ship. Only a small group of officers in the control room were conscious of the sudden inertia strain, when the rockets thundered out through earth's atmosphere. All the patients were mercifully in the long sleep that would seem like a minute of time, when awakened after months of racing through silent outer space.

JOHN felt the prick of the needle that awakened him to consciousness, through a vague haze of half forgetfulness. Suddenly he remembered, and tore feverishly at the straps holding him down. In a moment he was free from their restraint, but laughing in vexation at his forgetfulness when his exertions threw him upward, and he hung suspended in the cabin space dangling from the strap still held in his right hand. He had forgotten they had

left gravity behind. He pulled himself down and seized the sleeping shelf with his left hand. Clinging to it, he sidled along toward the forward port. Patients, under their straps as he passed, were slowly coming back to life, and they stared at him frightened, or amused or indifferent, according to their conditions. The attendants had gone from the cabin. At last John could see through a six foot plate of hardened glass. The view was slightly hazy, and unreal. Below their plunging ship was the Red Planet, still a vague sphere. The orange glow, familiar to earth telescopes, was gone now. The vast stretches of red desert and darker marsh areas became faintly distinguishable. Those regular lines of water channels from the opposing polar caps became visible to the naked eye, and were far less geometrical than earth pictures had shown them. It was summer in the northern hemisphere, and its polar cap had receded.

The one previous expedition to this dying planet had been given little publicity and John was fascinated by the view before him. At last they entered the thin atmosphere. Instant by instant, the deserts and low rounded hills grew visible. Lines of vegetation along the water channels turned green. Finally, the forward jets of the ship roared and John was crashed against the rear cabin wall, by the change of speed. He crawled painfully back to his sleeping shelf and strapped himself in. The rumor was true— He was on a ship of doom—and Hilda—where was she? Had she escaped? There was nothing he could do. The ship screamed into thicker, lower atmosphere and vibrations penetrated her thick hull.

John's memory of previous space trips told him they were nearly ready to land. There was hardly a jar, as they grounded and tilted slowly to rest. Sleepy eyed orderlies came in unsteadily, affected by the lighter gravity. They were pushing a truck full of helmets and oxygen tanks, which they deftly adjusted to the patients.

The men in this cabin were all able to walk and were soon outside the air lock. Following them came stretcher bearers, street roller ambulances, men on crutches, even a few of the more demented in glassite water jackets, from which they peered with dull eyes, as if they were drugged.

Hilda burst free from the second group of women and cried, "John! Oh, John, I'm so glad to find you."

She threw her arms around him and pillowed her head on his shoulder. He held her happily, his blood racing. This was a different girl from the hard and casual newspaper woman. Suddenly, she recovered.

"Sorry. Guess I have the old time jitters—I'll try not to let it happen again." She covered her gloved left hand with her right and turned away. "See what a hopeless pitiful mob," she said, after a moment.

"Yes, and I wonder what next. I've read that most of the old dwelling places are underground. The Martians made their last stand against desolation in cave cities."

"There's an entrance."

"Yes, and here come the guards."

The long procession of the lame, the blind, and the sick was soon in weaving motion over red sand toward a great metal door set into a low cliff. Their oxygen helmets bobbed almost comically. There were few guards and these made little attempt at restraint. John and Hilda went hand in hand toward a group in the lead, the seemingly able bodied ones.

"I suppose most of these are alcoholics and drug addicts," John remarked, absently, as they followed.

"Maybe this will really cure them. They certainly can't escape or bribe their way to intoxication here."

"What's the use of getting cured on this desert?"

"Don't give up, John. Oh, you're thinking that there will be no more Elks Club balls!" She took his arm and smiled desirously.

"Yes, maybe—"

"And all the Susies, and Mabels, and Evelyns were left behind— Too bad!" "Aw—cut it— We've got to figure out something—"

THE GUARDS were not unkind, but herded them like cattle, impersonally and silently. The great steel door clanged, and they were able to remove their helmets in the air conditioned interior.

This strange crowd of the banished drew together in a vast open cave, dimly lighted by weak electric globes. In the distance

they could hear the throbbing of an old fashioned generator. Dr. Henderson stood on an overturned packing case with one of the primitive sound amplifiers set up before him. He spoke calmly now, more at ease than at home, as if relieved.

"Men and women," he began, "we are not here to harm you. This great experiment is being conducted in the interests of humanity. The constant presence of the sick is disturbing to eugenic controls and ideals. The Leader and the Earth Council have wisely established this colony. You will still be treated by the best of our skill. Any who recover will be placed in an isolated and independent colony. The slightly crippled will be given handicraft and factory tasks. Their products will be shipped to Earth and sold to maintain the supply line."

"Where do we live?" blurted a portly, middle aged man near John.

"There are separated quarters a few miles down the passage— Of course rather primitive—but you can make yourselves fairly comfortable."

Hilda noticed one of the nurses standing near the Doctor. Her tightly waved blonde hair was gleaming in the dim light near the speaker's improvised platform. Her large blue eyes were slightly closed and her full red lips sagged almost hopelessly, but she was strikingly beautiful, with strong, clean cut features and a clear skin.

Beyond were other nurses and doctors in white uniforms, scattered like lonely ghosts among the five hundred and more patients. Hilda wondered what had induced these people to voluntarily leave the comforts of civilization. Were they derelects of time, idealists, or just out of work?

"There is one difference in this colony," went on Dr. Henderson in a lower tone. "If any of you find it too difficult to exist under the new conditions, euthanasia will be permitted—a sleeping pill in the white room—and your troubles are over."

"Yeah—and the state saves money!" snarled the white faced man who had rebelled at the hospital entrance before them.

"It will be purely voluntary," said Dr. Henderson calmly.

"Oh, I'll bet they'll use hypnotics!" whispered Hilda, in a shocked voice, "They'll make them want to— What a twisted code of ethics. They don't dare to

face their own attitudes. Such hypocrisy! Why not just line us up and use the ray guns?"

Doctor Henderson ended his address with additional promises and then stepped down. In a few minutes the crowd was broken up into small units. John and Hilda walked with the group of alcoholics and arrested mental cases. They began to talk and sought acquaintanceship to cancel fear. It was almost a relief to leave the congregation of pain behind them.

There was only one doctor with this group, Old Doctor Smithson, a retired psychiatrist who had begun working at the district hospital after losing his fortune in the stock market. He was now too old for general practice. His thin, bent shoulders straightened as he walked. His words became crisp and cheerful as if he welcomed the adventure. With him were two nurses, Mary, the blonde girl Hilda had noticed, and a little, red headed, freckled faced woman of indeterminate years.

Near Hilda and John walked Major Henry Mattson, a psychiatric casualty of the war of 1960, seemingly cured. The rebellious one, twice noticed by the reporters before, walked ahead. He said his name was Tony Pacina. A tall, white haired man with thick glasses, recently cured of a cataract, introduced himself as Mark Hemingway and said that he was a chemist and had been in the surgery at the hospital for his operation because of confidence in Dr. Henderson. If this should prove true his accidental presence might be helpful.

AROUND them were the others they would seek to know later. The group tramped briskly behind Dr. Smithson. They were the "cured" ones. With health, happiness is possible anywhere. They felt themselves beginning a strange comradeship, even cheerfulness.

"I wonder where they're taking us," said Hilda, clinging to John's arm to keep up with the brisk pace, and laughing at the way a little jump could lift her up and far ahead.

"I wonder, too. Well, Honey, if I must be cast away— I'm glad it's with you."

She squeezed his arm, but said nothing. There was light ahead at the end of the

long tunnel. They entered a large open chamber.

It was not a luxurious room, but neither was it a prison. There was sufficient heat, and the mattresses and sheets were clean. There were two shower and bath rooms beyond but no ultra violet equipment. Cloth curtains were hung to drop around their beds. One side of the room was lined half way to the ceiling with frayed and battered books. One wall had a moving picture screen. There was no television. One noted the absence of buttons to push and gadgets for speed and comfort. There were no sliding floors.

"Our legs will ache with all the walking in this city," said Hilda, rather doubtfully.

"I'll like that. I'd enjoy developing a little muscle again."

"I wonder where those passages go. Do you suppose they'll permit us to go out?"

"Let's see."

As they stepped to the door, Mary came forward and gave them each a folded paper map, and a double holster holding a radi-light and a gas pellet gun. Hilda buckled hers on, laughing at its weight. John stared at his thoughtfully.

"No real danger here," said the blonde nurse, "but our instruction manuals say there are Mars rats—something like the jack rabbits on western sage plains back home. They run around the cave area. Nothing larger has been left in the passages. They aren't very good to eat, so we just gas them and leave them to recover. Dr. Henderson wants a reserve food supply in case of emergency. They are about twice the size of rabbits back home, and their bite is infectious. If you go beyond any of the air doors, you may need oxygen helmets, the atmosphere is pretty thin. It will take you a bit of time to get used to the lighter gravity, but that's sort of fun." She said it all with professional cheeriness, as if it were memorized, but she paid very little attention to them.

"Want to come along?" asked John.

"Sorry. I have to stay here to help Dr. Smithson. I'd like to—maybe another time. We are both on duty today." She smiled, and the settled sadness of her face was gone for a moment.

"Well, thanks," said John, unfolding his map slowly.

"Oh, yes," she added, "and never go beyond sight of the entrance if you go out on the desert. You can see for miles even though the horizon is nearer up here. If danger comes you can make it back to the door easily. But there are very unpleasant things on this planet. The safety is all underground. Maybe you'd better have one of the manuals. It will be light outside and you can read." She took a thin booklet from the bundle of papers in her hand and gave it to Hilda, then walked briskly away.

They pushed open the room door, and stepped cautiously down a dry, dark passageway. Old marks of ray blast on the sandstone walls showed that all this underground world was artificial. Red desert sand underfoot was hard, dry and clean.

"Oh, John, it does seem good to be by ourselves again. All these sick folks depress me."

"Yes, and what depresses me is how I'm going to get you back to Earth. It may be months before another ship comes. And they won't dare to let us go back and tell, until the experiment is well established." He folded the map carefully.

"Think of all the hundreds of families back home who must be frantic."

John's voice was savage as he answered, "I found out a bit about that from the Major. It seems that every family got a printed letter, telling about the new colony and claiming it was mostly for the good of the patients. And there is a systematic health propaganda planned to follow that up, conditioning the minds of their relatives to the undertaking in all its implications. I believe the patients are even allowed to write letters—censored, of course, and delivered once in two years. You know there is no radio contact."

They walked on, in understanding silence, until she took his arm and indicated a great copper door. "Look, John, on the map it says that door 101 is an outside entrance. Let's go and see."

II

THEY adjusted helmets and manipulated the manual locks of the double doors, with some experiment. John finally convinced himself that he could re-enter without difficulty. Then the two

Earth people stepped out into a weird atmosphere under a strangely small sun. The sky was dark blue, tending toward black. Stars glittered, though it was still day. Their helmets provided a mixture of oxygen with the planet's natural atmosphere.

"It's like a dream, John."

The hills were old and worn out but there were no trees. Deep shadows folded into the distance in the cold slanting sunlight, tracing sandy curves with velvet-like smoothness.

John answered her thought, "Those vivid colors and deceptive distances remind me of my boyhood in Idaho. I'll bet there's the same difference between light and shade, too. Let's step into the shadow of that rock and see if it isn't suddenly much cooler."

He led her to a pyramid-like rock projecting about twenty feet out of the sand, and casting a shadow toward them.

Hilda exclaimed, "Yes, it is colder. 'Why?'"

"The thin air always diffuses heat less than moist heavy air near the sea, and at a lower altitude. I'll bet on a cold day you could get frozen out of the sunlight before you realized."

"And there are no clouds. What a strange dark sky!"

"I've read that there are often yellowish clouds of dust but it is only at night, when the cold comes with sunset, that moisture clouds are formed. Nights are too cold for human existence without special protection."

She shivered. "I'd get to hate that sky after a time. It is pitiless."

"You certainly would if you were lost on this desert."

"Let's rest a bit, John, and see what the manual has to say."

"Fine! We can lean our backs against this rock."

"We'd better get on the sunny side of it."

They walked around the rock, and slid down to the hard sand. Faint twists of sand curled around the sides of the rock but they were sheltered from the wind, and out of sight of the entrance, as if in a world of their own.

She rested her head on his shoulder contentedly as he turned the old, crudely

typeset pages of the manual. There were pen and ink illustrations of strange beasts, but no chapters on inhabitants.

"We're the only people here—" said Hilda, in an awed tone.

"Regular Adam and Eve picnic, with clothes on."

"I'd hate to be without clothes on this desert. No garden here."

"That's right. No place for a nudist colony on Mars."

She sat up suddenly, looking past the rock at a distant shadow. Her face grew pale, and she whispered fearfully, "Look, John! There's something moving over by those rocks."

He leaped to his feet. "Yes—and it's a Mars Coyote. I noticed a picture on page three. Harmless, I guess, but we'd better get back. It's close. We should have been watching."

THEY rose hastily and walked around the boulder, back toward the entrance. Hilda started and stifled a scream as they left the shelter. John drew his clumsy gas gun and stepped in front of her. Before them, on the red stretch of sand toward the entrance, were hundreds of the reddish-gray, smooth haired animals, with pointed noses and wickedly gleaming eyes.

These moved back silently as the two humans approached, but only a little way.

"The book says they're cowardly," she gasped, "but there are so many!"

"Too damned many— I wonder if I ought to shoot one, to keep the others away."

The red-gray circle bent away from them slowly, as they walked steadily across the weirdly shadowed sand toward the gleaming metal door, so far ahead. The animals massed thickly before them, and were finally crowded up against the cliff and its door. They slid out sideways but tumbled into each other. One made a dash forward, but John dropped it with the little gas pellet that broke against its hide, with a sinking yellow cloud of gas. There was also an injection of paralysis fluid from the plastic point of the pellet. The little gun made no noise as it was operated by a spring. John levered another pellet into the firing tube. After the yellow gas had blown away in the strong wind, the red-gray bodies crept toward

their fallen comrade and suddenly rushed in, with a horrible clicking of teeth and fierce, silent ripping of flesh.

"Oh—" cried Hilda—"and it's still alive. They're eating it alive!"

"Not much difference," grunted John as he aimed and fired rapidly at three more. Then he led her around the circle of rolling, crowding bodies. One coyote at the edge of the circle howled dismally. There were still a dozen or more between them and the door.

JOHN TRIED a new trick. He shot one of the beasts and ran quickly forward with his radilight in the cliff's shadow, frightening the others back. Then, while Hilda held her gun ready, he quickly scooped up the fallen coyote by its bushy tail and whirled it round his head to heave it far out over the milling mass of hungry bodies. Each hairy carcass felt unbelievably light to him, and he could cast them thirty feet away. When most of the coyotes were facing the living food away from the door John dragged her toward the great copper portal, shooting as they ran.

The lighter gravity had made the work fairly easy, but even so, he was sweating and his hands trembled as he seized the last one and tossed it into the air. Hilda was fumbling with the door.

"Let me do it!" he gasped, "I remember—"

Just then a shadow fell over them, and they were so startled as to look up from the door and step back. About fifty feet in the air hovered a small, almost spherical air boat, with no visible means of suspension or power. A port slid open on its under side and a square black muzzle pointed at them. Hilda seized John's arm in terror, as they felt themselves lifted by invisible force from the ground, above the great pack of startled coyotes. John noticed that the beasts were looking up and many of them yelping as they ran into the rubble of rocks beyond the cliff. There wasn't time to see how many fled, for he and Hilda were quickly sucked up into the open port by invisible tractor rays, the metal hull clanged shut, and they were thrown roughly on a hard floor. John had a blurred vision of a circle of white, long-bearded faces, on slender bodied old men, before a gleaming mirror-like reflector

dazzled him and he felt his hold on reality slipping. He struggled to his feet and reached for one of the old men, managing to seize a tangled silky beard before he fell forward into darkness.

THEY came to consciousness lying on soft low mattresses in a room softly illuminated with blue light. The air was slightly overwarm and humid but comfortable. They were dressed in skin fitting, silvery garments, partly transparent with skirts of blue, velvety cloth. Their hair was wrapped in transparent turbans.

Hilda recovered enough to blush uncomfortably and curl back on the couch. "I feel as if—I were wrapped in cellophane," she faltered.

"You're swell," gulped John gallantly, "an improvement in fact. I suppose they had to fumigate our own clothes or something. This superheated air suggests that our captors are old and delicate."

"The cellophane idea makes me wonder if we're wrapped up like rolls, or something, from the baker for—dinner."

"Meaning cannibalism? This kind of a room was never made by primitives, Honey."

"That's right— It's like a dream place." She rose up on her elbow again to look around.

There were no windows. It was utterly bare of ornament. John walked slowly around the circle of their walls. The only door opened to a tiny bath cubicle. Blue light, reflected upward from the juncture of floor and wall, cast no shadow, indicating its perfect diffusion. He paused with an exclamation.

"What is it, John?"

"Here's some kind of a control button, with symbols carved over it. Their language perhaps. I wonder what it's for."

"Better leave it alone—I'd sort of like to catch up with myself—"

But, at that moment, the button clicked in of its own accord—and one side of the wall glowed with rose colored light. A large screen showed an old man half reclining on a purple couch, dressed in a white, silver trimmed robe. He was smiling at them as he turned away from some recording device into which he spoke. His face was incredibly old, and wrinkled in a fine network of lines. His skin, strangely,

seemed of some soft, young texture. The bones of his cheeks were prominent, and his hands were delicately pink white. He moved gracefully, and in leisurely fashion, from the couch to a small black box at the side of the room, and pressed a button. On a small screen in the old man's room, visible on their own wall, began to flash words in red script.

"Say! That's in German," cried John. "I don't read German, but I know the script."

"And that looks like Chinese—"

"Ah—that's better—"

In red square blocked letters on the little screen were the words in English, "WE MEAN YOU NO HARM."

The old man observed their excitement, and stopped the flow of the screen so that the message steadied. Then, under that sentence, appeared another "BE PATIENT WE MUST FINISH TRANSCRIBING YOUR LANGUAGE. IT WILL TAKE A FEW MORE TIME. EAT—SLEEP—REST."

The screen on their room faded out. The old man's face was gone. And through a slit near the floor of their room slid a tray of food, moved by some invisible force on small rollers, over toward the mattress where Hilda was still sitting.

"Oh Boy—food! And could I use some—"

"Wait until you're properly served, Mister."

She spread out the pale yellow cloth on the floor and arranged the food in orderly fashion. It was moulded into various patterns and colors, and was firm enough to eat with their fingers, which was fortunate as there were no eating utensils. They both ate hungrily and were nearly finished when soft music came into the air from some invisible source. It was hauntingly mingled in composition, but all vaguely familiar, drifting from the limited scale of the Orient to waltzes and furious Russian symphonies. The hill billy band that finally played seemed oddly out of harmony and yet aroused a nostalgia for home in their hearts.

"I feel like a nap—" said Hilda, yawning.

"So do I—wonder if there was a drug—in—that—milk."

It seemed only a moment to John that he had been sleeping, but his muscles were

rested, his weariness was gone, and he felt invigorated. He looked for his watch, but it was not there. In fact there were no pockets. Then he remembered!

Hilda was splashing around in the bath cubicle, and singing.

"Hello, Sleepy!" she said, emerging and adjusting a strap in the strange silvery clothing.

"So—it wasn't a dream—"

"No, and hurry up with your bath. Your head is tousled. Maybe they'll feed us again. I don't want to eat opposite that mop."

"Yes, dear—" he said, attempting scorn, but only achieving a new tenderness.

She looked down, and instinctively dropped her crippled arm behind her back. The glove was no longer fresh, but stained from the desert, though wrinkled where she had tried to launder it. Under the transparency of her sleeve the ugly stump of her arm revealed itself discordantly. With a forced gaiety, she crossed the room and pretended to hunt for their breakfast. But it didn't come.

"Maybe they don't know our eating habits," remarked John glumly, as he plastered his unruly locks with his hands. "Wish I had a comb."

AT LAST the slide opened in the wall and a tray came in, but on it, instead of food, was a book. Hilda seized it eagerly, crying, "It's a lexicon. See, here are the English words, and the signs for their language. The ink still smells fresh. They must have just printed it."

"What's the sign for ham and eggs?"

"Maybe we'd better try just 'food'—can't be too particular."

"What'll we write with?"

"Here's a kind of pencil, but no lead on it."

"Look, Hilda, there's a new white spot on the wall. Let me have that pencil thing." A blue line followed his tracing, and it glowed with a faint edging of fire.

"Some kind of a transfer current I suppose. Well, here goes— Let me see that food character."

"Here it is—just a round circle, with three dots at the side."

"Fine, Sister, here's hoping the dots mean eggs and that you get one of them."

"Pig!"

There were no eggs, but the little round cakes, appearing a moment later, proved delicious. A warm liquid in the crystal cups was almost a substitute for coffee. In fact, it proved much more stimulating.

After breakfast, John boldly pressed the visi-screen control. This time, instead of one old man, they faced a group of them around a green table, covered with lexicons, other books, and charts.

They recognized the spokesman who stepped forward into a close up perspective and began the conversation. "I hope you will forgive our seeming—" he paused. "Aloofness," supplied one of the other men, after hastily examining a lexicon. "That's right, our aloofness, but we are products of an artificial world. Your primitive contagion would be dangerous for us."

"I am also sorry," he went on, "that the conversation must be one direction until you learn more of our language, and we can pronounce more finely and hear. We have had difficulty even in assembling visual information about you. There was a collection of Earth photographs which we have magnified so that we could read your street signs. And the first expedition left a few scraps of paper. We had never considered it worth learning your way of speech before."

He paused, as if this part of the address had been memorized. Then he continued slowly, with hesitations and stumbling pronunciation. "We are trying to vocalize your words from those we have heard you speak—but our ears are poor—I mean inadequate." The other old men rustled charts and books and nodded at his correction. The address went on with more pauses and confirmations. Occasionally John had to write "repeat" on the wall chart. The Martians spoke with a strange sibilant hiss, and accents followed a different system, changing even common words enough to make it difficult to understand. In general, this was their explanation. . . .

"Our scientists discovered your world several thousands years ago, but as it was a more primitive one, progressing slowly, they could not see any advantage in making contact. The one danger to us here, a lack of water, could not be remedied by travel to the Blue Planet. Instead, our

wise ones devoted themselves to developing an underground civilization, free from the extremes of temperature on our planet. Atomic energy had given us all the heat and power we needed, and in a short time we were able to devote our energies to aesthetics, as soon as the physical necessities were satisfied."

"Each year the flooding polar caps supply us with natural vegetation along the water channels and in the marshes. These plants are harvested and chemically treated for efficiency of use. When the last moisture fails, the remnant of our people must migrate, but that will not be for several of our generations. It may surprise you to know that each of us is over two hundred years old, that is of your years. Our younger men spend fifty years in attaining an education, under very sheltered conditions. We do not wish to disturb them by curiosity about you—at least not for the present. Our women live a very specialized existence, as the birth rate is low, and it takes nearly all of their energy to protect young life and to keep our population from diminishing too rapidly."

JOHN thumbed feverishly through the little book until he found the word for "space ship" then another for "Earth—" He puzzled for other words and wrote, "many years—last—not see—" It was incoherent but these old men had an uncanny way of guessing context of meaning.

"You mean, why did previous expeditions not find us? We took care of that, since we knew, long before they started, that they were coming. Much of the life on your world is transmitted to us by devices your mind have not yet dreamed. When the ships came we covered—no, camouflaged—our entrances. We were not discovered. You two have been brought here for a medical reason—"

John wrote, "question."

"Yes, we want to know about your woman companion's arm, and about the others in the cave—what has happened on earth—?"

The old man's face peered, suddenly eager, closer up to the screen. His eyes watered, and the calm manner was gone. His thin fingers tapped a lexicon nervously.

Hilda pointed to words in her lexicon and John wrote, "cripple—colony."

The old scientist grew pale and he staggered a bit as he turned to the others. Their white beards bent in an almost comical cluster over the little green table and bobbed excitedly. Their hissing syllables were shrill. Suddenly the screen blanked out.

"Well, what do you know about that?"

"John, do you remember what they said about 'primitive contagion'?"

"Yes, I get it— You mean they are afraid."

"Of many things—other colonies to follow this—their eventual discovery—diseases! Perhaps it is partly that we cripples offend their sense of beauty—"

"Forget it, Kid, you've got more pep in one hand than any girl I ever knew had in two."

She smiled at him gratefully, before she turned away, and then her voice was still gay—"That isn't what you say to all the girls— Well, what next?"

John stood with his feet apart as if alert to danger. He combed his fingers through the already tousled mop of reddish brown hair. After a moment of silence, he said, "Do you suppose that will make a difference in their attitude toward us?"

"Perhaps not—after all, most of the trouble came with the ship. They are not angry with us— We'll just have to wait and see."

It wasn't a long wait. A larger opening in the wall allowed the sliding entrance of a small glasslike dome, containing their Earth clothes and oxygen helmets on a low bench inside.

The old scientist who had been talking to them before, appeared again on the screen. He ordered, impersonally, "Dress yourselves, lift the cover, and then strap yourselves to the seat inside. We are going to take you for a trip. The dome is to protect us from you."

"Isn't much else to do, is there?" said John hopelessly.

"Let's assume they are friendly, until they prove otherwise."

Their tiny glass cage slid away down a dimly lighted corridor, with no visible means of power, and clicked into place in the cabin of the same round aircraft that had captured them. Several of the

old men were seated in padded and swinging chairs which moved rhythmically at moments of unsteadiness. They, too, were strapped in place, as if ready for any violent action of the ship, and the arc of each swaying chair was limited.

In an hour they were hovering over the desert area again. Heavy sunset clouds were rich in coloring. The desert sands were whirling into a gathering dusk and the whole sky was overcast. The speed slowed, and John recognized the familiar rock and cliff entrance where they had been captured. At last their small ship settled down on the sand and the little cage slid out gently on the hard sand.

"Maybe they're just going to let us go, John."

"I hope not— I want to know more about them."

A crackling and distorted voice spoke, electrically in their ears, "Please get out and walk quietly toward the entrance. We mean you no harm. Your friends are coming—"

"Well, that's that!" John rolled back the cover and straddled over the edge, turning to help Hilda follow him.

They gasped as the intense cold of sunset struck through their thin clothing. Then they turned and ran toward the metal door, leaning into the wind and sheltering their hands from the blowing sand. The door slid open and Doctor Smithson came running toward them with fur coats in his arms. Behind him walked Mary, the nurse, bundled up and smiling. Even more slowly, old Jake Adams hobbled on crutches. Doctor Smithson cast uneasy glances at the strange airship, but came steadily toward them. Just as he was helping John into a coat, the lower port of the Mars ship opened and that square black projection came thrusting through. John saw it and cried, disgustely, "Don't be afraid. This won't hurt— We're going for a ride upstairs! . . ."

His last words were spoken from a distance of ten feet above ground. . . . In a few minutes, the five of them were crowded into that little glass cage, and sat staring at the old men in resentment. Jake had lost his crutches and lay, in a ridiculous posture, on the floor, his two wooden pegs spread out at a wide angle. He scowled truculently at the old men.

III

IT WAS WARM in the round Mars ship and cage. In a few minutes, they were sailing into rapidly falling darkness. John lost all sense of direction. At last, blue lights flashed in the cold night above a dim floor of thick plant life, and their little ship slid sidewise to a stop inside a massive hillside door. They could not understand why Jake was rayed into unconsciousness and taken away, before they were sent sliding and unattended down the long corridor to their former room. There were now four of the low beds and a fresh tray of food had been prepared. They are, and fell into drugged sleep.

Life went on quietly, back in this observation cage, nearly a week. Every morning they were questioned for an hour or more by the council of scientists through the wall screen. Hilda persuaded John to be as cooperative as possible, hoping that the old men's intentions were still kind. The questions were especially centered about details of health on earth, medicine, eugenic control, the number of sick people, and about the possibility of future colonies.

Mary and Dr. Smithson proved fascinating companions in the long idle hours, with a dramatic story to tell of their recent trip to Venus. Earth's first expedition to that world in 1978 had not yet been reported in the public press.

It was on the sixth day that they saw Jake Adams again. He came sliding in on a rolling stretcher, propelled by unseen forces, and his eyes were closed.

Mary gasped, "Look at his legs!"

John stepped quickly to the stretcher and ran his hands over Jake's body, then stood and cried. "They're warm—and alive!"

During their brief wait in the cave they had seen the old soldier stumping around on two wooden legs, supplemented by crutches. He was spry and cheerful for a man nearly seventy years old, and his hands and arms were abnormally strong. Hilda had been indignant that the army should neglect this old hero and fail to provide him with suitable artificial limbs. Her own handicap made her feel a special sympathy, and she had stopped to talk with the old fellow briefly. He told her

that he had been wounded in the battle against the Japs in the Marshall Islands during 1944.

Now the old soldier lay, with a slightly flushed face, breathing quietly, and in place of the wooden pegs were *two perfectly formed legs wrapped in silvery transparent leggings!*

As they watched, the old man slowly awakened, but lay still as if dazed. Then an expression of alarm or amazement began to open his eyes. He moved his toes, and then lay back muttering, "No, it's just another of them nerve tricks—the way I used to feel about the weather!" But he slowly raised his head, as if fascinated. When his eyes focused on the new feet, he snapped suddenly to a sitting position and reached for his ankles.

"I can feel! I can feel— They're alive!" he screamed.

Then he saw John bending over him, and the others in the background. "How did you do it— What's happened— Am I dreaming?"

"No, old chap, it's real enough, but the old ones must have done it for you."

A high, thin voice interrupted—"We're glad you are pleased."

They whirled toward the wall screen. Old Senegar faced them from his purple couch, leaning wearily on an elbow—"It was quite a bit of trouble, but interesting."

John fumbled through his lexicon and found the word for "how?" and scribbled it on the white wall plate.

"We thought you would want to know— Sit down, it will take a few minutes. I will try to be elementary in my discussion."

They squatted in a half circle on the floor, all except Jake—who refused to sit, and teetered around feeling the muscles of his new legs, jumping, stretching, rocking on his toes, but listening all the while.

"To us, it is relatively simple," went on the old man. "First we stimulate the bone cells to grow down a plastic hollow tube. This is done by depositing a calcium compound in the tube and focusing a ray of complex force upon it. Of course, the tube is made to order in relationship to measurements of the patient's other bones. Artificial veins and arteries are introduced. We do not bother with all the tiny capillaries. They will grow

in later. Synthetic cell tissue is moulded into the shape of muscles and stimulated with pinealin, which we have at last isolated. Starangely, one of the most difficult techniques is that of skin grafting. We grow skin on a hairless type of laboratory animal and patch it on with grafting glue. The healing is hastened by a special ultra violet and electrodynamic apparatus. Of course, the artificial arteries are connected when installed. Their wall composition allows blood to flow out into the cell tissue in about two days. With the arteries is laid down a series of main nerve sheaths. We do not try to restore all the original sensitivity, because the procedure is too complex. We find that a clumsy subsidiary nervous tentacle is developed, under high pressure electric nerve currents introduced briefly through the central nervous system before the lower frequency body current is allowed its own way. His legs will never be quite as effective as the original pair but do well enough, and only a doctor could detect the difference."

HILDA stepped forward and wrote on the white square the words she had been finding in her lexicon. "Your kindness is almost beyond our understanding. I knew you were good people. We wish we could do something in return."

Senegar rolled his spare body off the couch and his high voice was almost senile in his excitement—"You can, my dear—you can!"

"Anything—we will do anything," she answered.

"It will be rather unpleasant for you at first."

"What do you want?" added John standing in Hilda's side.

"Sit down, sit down! I will tell you."

The group of Earth people relaxed but with upturned faces, held fascinated by the old one's earnestness. John's hands were clasped tightly around his knees. Doctor Smithson kept hitching his lean frame forward. The old man's voice was low as he went on.

"This is the trouble, my children, your people are a menace to us. All this ugliness would be bad enough, but the danger of infection is terrible. Our wise ones are fragile beings. We restore the flesh

when there is injury or sickness, but we always lose a little of the original vitality. We cannot be killed, but we slowly wear out and must be protected. Our young ones are too few to risk contact with you. Thus we are forced to the logical conclusion that the Earth colony of sick ones must be destroyed and the next ship discouraged from returning."

"No!—No, that's inhuman!" gasped Mary.

"Nothing will happen to you five— We wish to retain you for medical and breeding purposes. But the others must go. Come, now, why should you care about them? You admitted they are all strangers to you. Think of the joy of living several hundred years."

"But those sick ones—they are human!" cried Hilda to John, weeping. "They must find some other way— How could they do such a thing, when they have just shown us such kindness?"

"Self protection, my dear," murmured the old man, reading her face and catching some of the words. "Self preservation and security for the qualitatively higher civilization of Mars. Let men from the Blue Planet continue to settle here, and in a hundred years we will be extinct. The Universe needs our wisdom. Those primitives must die, as you would kill your pet animals in a famine, or send sons to fight in one of your mad wars."

"You can have your—I mean my legs back," growled Jake, "gimme my pegs again." His pantomime may have been understood. Senegar smiled, faintly.

"Think it over carefully. Do not let your simple emotions confuse you. I will see you again tomorrow. We need your help."

The screen faded slowly into a blur, and in a moment they were alone in the plain, blue lighted room—five human beings, terror stricken in a place of comfort.

"My head aches," grunted Jake, "that machine they used on me first left a sore spot."

"What kind of a machine was it?"

"I dunno—some kind of a thing. They kept asking me questions and wrote down the answers even before I spoke— That was funny! And sometimes when I lied to them—about some of the things I did, on shore leave and so on, they laughed.

It was almost like they partly read my mind."

"Perhaps they did," remarked Doctor Smithson, who had been very quiet during all the excitement. His eyes gleamed with an almost impersonal interest. "Our psychoanalysis is very clusy. I have always wished there were some kind of mechanical means of intuitively reaching to the under experiences of the subconscious." Suddenly he got to his feet from the low mattress bed where he had been sitting alone since the stunning proposal. He began to pace the floor, clasping and unclasping his thin arms. "I wonder—" He seemed to have forgotten their presence, "I wonder if they can stimulate brain tissue with pinealin. I'll wager half of those mental cases back underground could be cured by these men in a week! If I could only persuade them to talk to me."

"Look who's here," remarked Jake quietly, as if nothing in this strange room could surprise him.

A slight young man, with brown hair and keen blue eyes, stood in a flowing white robe marked by silver trimmings and a red diagonal stripe running from his shoulder to the floor. There was no sign of a door where he had entered.

"I heard what you said, Doctor Smithson, or at least part of it," he remarked quietly in a soft musical voice. "I am Zingar. Some of us younger ones think the old men are too fearful—I wish I could go back to Earth with you and assist your struggling medical men."

John paged through the book hurriedly, hunting for words.

"Just a moment," interrupted the young stranger. He stepped to the wall and tapped a code sign. At his feet a slit opened and a dark gray, complicated machine slid into the room.

"That's one of them things they hitched to my head," said Jake excitedly.

ZINGAR drew out a cord from the gray machine, with a small black disk at the end, and laid it against the side of John's head, where it remained as if glued.

"Now think what you wish to say, and I will know the essence of your meaning," remarked Zingar. "It will not convey words or technical matter but blurred pictures of experience. I will ask questions

to guide your memory. And if you will think aloud it may help as I already have memorized much of your spoken language."

John tried to think coherently, but, under his conscious sentences when he spoke aloud was a flickering jumble of excitement, ideas for escape, thoughts of Hilda as he looked at her, memories of their recent conversations with Senegar.

"Relax, young man," ordered the Martian youth, "I find it difficult to receive. This device only registers your subvocal thoughts. Your mind is like a kaleidoscope at present. Try not to think of the young lady."

Hilda drew in her breath quickly and blushed.

John's face was red from his neck to his hair. "Young man, yourself," he blurted, "how old do you think I am?"

"Young in comparison to me. I am seventy five. Now think of what your hospital was like back on earth."

John steadied his mind and visualized the events of their last day on Earth.

"There—that's better," said Zingar quietly. "If this could have registered technical matter the old ones wouldn't have to bother to learn your language." He shifted the black disk to Doctor Smithson's bony forehead.

"If you believe we should be helped, why not let us escape—even go with us." urged John.

"I have thought of it," he replied calmly.

Mary came up to him quickly—"Oh, please do. I know you are good—I *love* those sick people back there underground. There are a few who think only of their sickness but most of them are really much finer than selfish normal people. Their handicaps have made them strong and kind. They can even laugh at pain."

Zingar abruptly removed the disk from Doctor Smithson, to the latter's disgust, and placed it gently on Mary's golden waves. "Please repeat—remember we cannot understand your words very clearly, but we can receive your picture thoughts. I heard part of what you said."

Mary repeated her plea, but she also blushed, as if the sudden nakedness of her secret mind before him was embarrassing. He smiled appreciatively and they withdrew to one of the low mattresses and sat

together for an hour or more, apart from the others. They seemed to forget the present world entirely, but Zingar's questions were too low for John to hear, and he was still curious at the story back of Mary's quiet sadness. Hilda thought, why they can get as much acquainted in an hour as we do ordinarily in years. I never have really known what John thought about my hand. . . . Both of them glanced at Mary occasionally and it seemed, after a long time, that some of the strain passed from her face and a strange quiet happiness flowed over it. Finally they arose and came to the center of the room, where there companions were still talking excitedly.

"I will do it—tonight," said Zingar with dignity. "I will go with you, and be one of you—even back to the Earth. But first I must prepare and I want to bring my twin sister with me. We are inseparable."

He walked to the blank wall of the room and again tapped rhythmically on it until a low doorway opened. He stooped and disappeared. John immediately tried to repeat the tapping combination, but the wall remained as solid as if it were stone.

In the quiet room there was little sense of time. Food came in to them automatically after an hour or so. They were too excited to think of sleep.

At last the wall opening appeared again and Zingar returned, leading a beautiful, brown-haired girl by the hand. She was tall and dressed in pale blue transparencies, with a tight purple girdle, and a gleaming silver star surmounted her soft hair like a coronet.

John stared. In all his many and easy adventures with women he had never seen anyone like her. There was a fragility to her body yet the glow of health. Her eyes were luminous, of a warm green shade, and they seemed to hold strange secrets. Her body was identical with an Earth woman's except that the fingers were smoothly longer and the high forehead was slightly more prominent. He felt some hypnotic influence flow from her into his mind, and involuntarily stepped forward, then stopped, suddenly remembering his companion. He had not thrilled like this since he was seventeen.

Across the room, Hilda clasped the wrinkled glove on her artificial hand, until

the fingers of her right hand were white, but she smiled and talked to Doctor Smithson as if she had not noticed.

"We will go now," said Zingar, taking command of the little party. "In the hallway are insulated suits for protection against our midnight cold. The ship will be warm, but we must step from the desert to your underground entrance. I do not think we will be hindered. The Old Ones sleep soundly." It was almost miraculous that his accent and hesitation disappeared so rapidly, perhaps because he was still relatively young and adaptable.

THEIR small round ship flared over the blackened planet; its rays, that had been invisible in the daylight, were now gleaming silent jets on the dimly starlit desert. Dr. Smithson, Jake, and Hilda sat together at the rear of their cabin compartment. John and Zingar's lovely sister stared into the night ahead. He had not touched her yet, but he felt drawn to her with a strange compulsion, partly spiritual. Her name was Molae.

Mary and Zingar were now frankly in love, and sat with arms around each other, quietly content, as if they had never been strangers. The Mind Sounder was attached to her gleaming hair by its smooth round disk and she seemed to be pouring her whole life into Zingar's eager mind. All maidenly reserve had vanished. None of his questions embarrassed her.

That's a good thing, thought John, noticing them. Mary will keep him with us, and he will make her come to life.

They had flashed on through the night for about half an hour when Jake yelled, "They're after us!"

Like tiny streaming rockets a fleet of the little ships danced over the horizon in pursuit, still so distant as to seem but fireflies.

"Don't be alarmed," said Zingar, leaving Mary and staring behind them, somberly, "they will slowly overtake us but we will make the underground city in time. They have no weapons, for our civilization had no need for them. It will take time to invent and manufacture the means of destruction."

In half an hour, their ship slid slowly to the ground as Zingar deftly manipulated the controls. They donned the opaque

and clumsy insulation garments, fastened helmets above them, and ran across the frozen sand toward the great copper door, dull in the starlight. John fumbled at the hand lock, but finally got it open, just as the first of the pursuing ships began its perpendicular descent from the higher air. The second metal door slid noisily into place before the lifting rays could touch them, and Hilda snapped on her radilight flash to guide the party down the sandy tunnel toward the colony.

In another half hour they were sitting in council, with Major Mattson, Hemingway, the old chemist, Dr. Henderson and other officials.

Dr. Henderson paid little attention to his recovered companions but questioned Zingar rapidly. The Mind Sounder and an occasional written question, or reference to a lexicon, kept the interview going smoothly. Finally Zingar stood and addressed the entire group.

"My people are ruthless and unemotional, but they are not equipped for war. I think this will be their plan of attack. They will set their machinery to work, producing the war weapons of several of the primitive planets, but that will take time, perhaps six months. Meanwhile they will try strategy, and perhaps drive the Mars beasts at us with their ship flares at night."

"What's them Martian beasts like?" grunted Jake. "That's maybe something I could fight."

"Oh, they're horrible!" murmured Mary. "Here, look at the pictures in this manual."

The old marine's weatherbeaten face paled a bit, but his voice was steady, as he said, "Well, anyway, they can't get through them copper doors."

"No, but my people will batter those down," said Zingar in a low tone.

"Then we must prepare for defense," cried Dr. Henderson, "if they can break down the front door we must barricade every passageway and fight them back foot by foot. What is the substance of your ship's hull?"

"It is a very dense metal, unknown to you. None of your rays will penetrate it except the atom cannon."

"And we only have one old cannon, with hardly any of the power jackets—" groaned Dr. Henderson, desperately.

"We will save that for the last attack," said Zingar, calmly. "The disintegrators will hold the beasts back for a long time, but there are thousands of them. How many of the half-hour disintegrator charges do you have?"

"Not very many—The Earth Council was limited in its budget. Perhaps they would last one day of continuous firing."

IV

IN TWO DAYS the whole underground city was buzzing with activity. Mark Hemingway had improvised a laboratory and was isolating the various minerals of the corridor walls, seeking materials for ammunition. Major Mattson drilled all the able-bodied men and organized them under group officers. The crippled men and women were soon co-operating in a central factory unit, where hand forges, and smelting pits, were producing crude weapons of war. There were many women working, even at the heavier tasks. The enfeebled patients lay on their cots and rolled bandages, or did other light tasks.

Great stores of cooked food were being prepared against the day when every cook would be in the fighting lines. The able-bodied soldiers divided their time between drilling under Major Mattson, and erecting barriers as directed by old Jake, whose practical ingenuity used the abundant supply of cheap blasting powder to skillfully crumble corridor walls. Their one power crane heaped the rubble into thick barriers, each with a narrow defensible slit. Huge boulders were balanced, ready to fall into the opening when a flash match should be applied to a cloth fuse.

They had been working a few minutes, on the third morning, when the radio outpost at the farthest entrance announced, "The beasts are coming!"

There were no television screens, but the announcer's description was horrible enough.

"They've got walking snakes in front—with triangular heads like rattlers—probably poisonous—but a bite from one of those babies would be enough anyway, they're twenty feet long. Now they are nearer—I wondered how they could come so fast—*They're running.* Every damned one of them has a row of little short legs,

that hustle them along. . . . Their hissing sounds like steam from hundreds of locomotives, even in this atmosphere."

The announcer quieted down to a sense of awe— "Off to the side, there's a group of big things . . . big as six elephants, with long, heavy tails dragging, and small heads. They seem to be covered with some kind of scales.

"Up in the air is a flight of flying lizards, about six feet long I should guess, and I can see their teeth flashing when a ship gets near. They keep trying to turn back, but the ships herd them in the air like a flock of flying sheep. Probably only dangerous when cornered. I wonder if they are poisonous.

"There's a space of several miles of clear desert behind, and beyond there is a dark wave of beasts clear to the sky line. I can't see them, because it is still too dark. . . . It looks like a black ocean rolling at us!" The announcer's voice stopped and the silence was oppressive.

"Hell, I've seen worse than that in the D.T.'s," cracked one of the alcoholics, but his hands trembled as he picked up the largest of the crude stone throwers. "This pop gun might stop one of the birds, but it wouldn't do much to the giant elephants."

Major Mattson roared into a megaphone in the huge drill room. "Well, boys, this is it— We've got plenty to fight and damned little to fight with. If we can get all the big beasts with the disintegrators before they break down the barriers, we'll be O.K. The Mars Colony expects every man to shoot his damndest— *Let's go!*"

The cheering mob, in loose order, ran down the corridors with their pathetic little guns, Major Mattson and Jake in the lead. Jake leaped on his new legs like a man of twenty, and roared as if he had found a new hold on life. The buzz and hum of activity behind them continued. Forges flared, hammers clanged, and in the distance some of the patients were singing a martial hymn.

JOHN watched the dark tide approaching the cliff entrance, from his observation slit high overhead. He leaned as close to it as his oxygen helmet would allow and spoke quietly into the transmitter.

"They're bringing up the Magnadons. I

can see that there is a strange ape-like creature riding each one and steering it with some kind of a burning rod. These are about the size of men but they look small in comparison. I wonder if those apes are in communication with the ships, or just ordinary desert anthropoids."

He left the explanation to Zingar, back in headquarters, and continued to report the dawn approach. Overhead, almost a hundred ships hovered close above the seething flow of animal and reptile life. Several were near the entrance, and the defenders experimentally tried out their weapons.

The first barrage was from old explosive shell weapons. But as each shell flashed and roared toward the ships it seemed to hit an invisible wall of force about fifty feet from the hull where it exploded in empty air. The ships were not even rocked, but the Magnadons squealed in terror. Vibrations of the explosions jarred the door frame, even the cliff itself.

The disintegrator artillery scarred the thick hulls slightly but the invisible rays failed to penetrate far, even in a direct hit, and the weaving ships took most of these shots at glancing angles with no damage.

The defenders tried their thunder-spreading atomic cannon once. Its lightning flash struck one of the tiny ships full center and a gaping hole burst inward and out the rear section of the hull, so that the morning sky showed through. The defenders cheered when this was reported. The little ship lurched up into the air, and others drew near, grappling it with more tractor rays. John could see the unconscious forms of old men carried past the ragged hole by helmeted figures and into another ship, through joined hulls. When the crippled craft was released it crashed quickly on the still frozen desert sand. Then it rolled over and lay still. But one shot from the atomic cannon took the force of one power jacket—and there were only nine jackets left!

Dr. Henderson ordered the atomic cannon withdrawn to the central defense area, against that time when the Martian ships would be flying down the high corridors, directing a river of snakes and flying lizards.

The battle went on with disintegrator

rays dropping scores of the air-screaming, twisting Mars snakes, and one or two of the smaller group of Magnadons. But the Martian ships, finding that the atomic cannon was no longer in operation shielded one of the Magnados with their hulls as the great beast approached and puts its shoulders against the copper door. The locks held until the doors buckled in the center, as if hit by a giant battering ram. Air hissed out, and a moment later the gigantic beast burst through, only to fall trumpeting to the ground under a disintegrator ray. In thirty seconds it was dead.

But behind it slithered and ran the great snakes, with their gaping jaws and long dripping fangs. They seemed as numerous as the white flashing waves of an angry ocean shore. Overhead, the roof was black with flying lizards, bumping and crowding in the dim shadows, with ridiculous faint mewing sounds. Stone throwers dropped hundreds of these, and disintegrators stopped dozens more of the running snakes, until a wall of dead flesh protected the second defensive barrier.

MAJOR MATTSON gave the order, and a flash and roar of blasting powder dropped a great boulder into place. The corridor seemed almost still, shut off from the jungle sounds of their inhuman enemies. The men retreated in good order to the next defense wall. They realized that their ammunition must be conserved against the real menace, the thundering herd of Magnadons, with their guiding, sheltering ships. . . .

The first corridor entrance was burst through after ten minutes by one of the great beasts, which fell in the gap and had to be pulled back by the ships. Boulders rolled out like pebbles from further blows, until the opening was wide enough for a protecting ship to fly through, low over the sandy floor, with a Magnadon nosing behind it. The great feet thumped deliberately down toward the Earthmen, plunging ten inch tracks into the packed sand, each as large as a small round table. Shooting the apes from their backs did not stop them.

John had withdrawn from the lookout post just as the first entrance door crashed. He then operated one of the disintegrator batteries, until recalled to the council

chamber. From there he learned that the same battle scene was being repeated at each barrier. Sometimes a Magnadon was killed before it broke through, sometimes after. The Martians protected the great beasts as well as they could, hoarding their supply. Zingar said it would take two months to bring a new herd from the swamp lands, as there was no way to transport them except on slow surface sleds.

Because of the strange nature of this combat the defenders suffered no casualties. The snakes and flying lizards were killed and piled up in front of each barrier. After each firing slit was sealed there was a brief rest.

At last the defenders attempted strategy. Seeing that under the present conditions it was only a matter of time, Major Mattson called for volunteers to attempt the capture of a shipload of the Martians to hold as hostages. About a dozen men made a sortie against the snakes, knowing it was futile, but succeeding in drawing the ship down over them. They were sucked up by the tractor rays, and pulled into the little hull but every man's pockets had been filled with gas capsules, and, as they fell unconscious under the paralysis mirrors, yellow clouds of gas filled the ship's cabin until the white bearded old Martians were unconscious too.

The battle had proceeded nearly to the central defense area, and now the atomic cannon flashed a hole through the Mars ship, high up in the hull, causing it to crash. A desperate charge of all the defenders kept the Mars snakes back long enough to allow the unconscious enemies and volunteers to be brought back behind the last and strongest barrier. They made it just before the first of the rescuing ships reached the spot. Several of the battered and atom shocked men never recovered consciousness. All were carried to the hospital behind the fighting front.

Then came a lull in the battle. The Magnadons and ships withdrew, leaving only the hissing and twisting snakes in the corridor, and a small observation ship down the tunnel out of range. The flying lizards took this opportunity to escape. A few snakes that had crawled through were disintegrated. This was the situation faced by the council of war, at noon.

Dr. Henderson's white coat was now

spattered with blood, where he had carried and treated some of the wounded. His face seemed old and drawn, as he addressed the Council.

"It looks bad— If we had a hundred atomic power jackets left, instead of eight, we might make it. I wonder if they know how limited our supply is."

UNDER the emotional situation, Zingar's accent was more pronounced but intelligible, "Every word we speak is amplified by their distance receivers. A race that can faintly hear train whistles on earth, and can see the surface of your planet as if with a large telescope from the moon, doesn't have much trouble to know what our situation is. But we have one bargaining point. Old Senegar was in that first ship, and his intelligence is in ratio to that of the other Martians as one hundred to one. They would concede almost anything to preserve his safety."

"But how can we bargain, since we have no way to escape the planet?" asked John.

"We might hold the old man as a permanent hostage until the time when Mars is in proximity to Earth again, a year from next August, and the colony supply ship comes," suggested Mark Hemingway.

"The old man wouldn't live that long," said Zingar quietly. "This atmosphere would be fatal to him— Let me talk to my father."

"*Your father!*" cried Mary. Quickly adjusting the headphone of the Mind Sounder she poured out her unconscious sympathy to her lover's receiving mind. He drew her to him gently, and then turned and faced the others, still holding her.

"Let me talk to him," he said, "I think I have an idea."

The group walked hurriedly behind Zingar and Dr. Henderson toward the field hospital area.

There was a silent drama of sympathy in the expression of these two Martians, as Zingar stood near his father's hospital cot. They spoke rapidly but quietly in their own language.

"What's he sayin'?" growled Jake. "Can we trust the young squirt?"

"I don't understand," said John. "I only know a few of their words. But they keep repeating one word which means 'cripples,' or 'sick.'"

At last the young Martian turned and spoke to them, but mostly to Mary—"How much do you love your native planet? Would you be willing to stay with us—all of you to be healed and made well, and serve to invigorate the stock of the Mars men?"

There was a buzz of excitement and argument. Most of the Earthmen who had not seen the hidden Martian city were violently opposed, but a few were too sick to care—and many remembered that they were lost anyway, when the atomic power jackets should be exhausted. John stood close to Molae and looked at her questioningly.

"Don't stay for my sake, John," she said sadly, "our instincts draw us to each other, but our minds are a whole generation apart. We would have constant misunderstandings. Remember, I am as old as Zingar."

He hesitated a moment, then wrote, "But Mary and Zingar are planning to be married."

"That is their business," she replied looking at Mary. "Perhaps it is a reasonable chance to take when the husband is the older mentality, but I don't want a mental child for a husband. Besides I—I have been remembering Nogar, my former lover—before I saw you."

Their isolated dialogue was only a small murmur in the vocal excitement of the throng of Earth people, which suddenly quieted as Major Mattson boomed over the crowd with his megaphone—"Well, shall we vote on it?"

But Zingar raised his hand and cried, "Wait!—My father should speak first."

The old man sat painfully up in his bed and spoke into the microphone of the old amplifying set so that his sibilant whispering voice echoed the broken accents down the high vaulted ceilings of the great cave space.

"Listen to me well, O selected people of a youthful race— This violence has been a vast folly. I should have realized before. . . . My sense of the aesthetic was offended by your ugliness, especially by the sick and crippled among you, so that I did not realize your one great virtue which cancels all the rest. I have observed the co-operative efficiency of your defenses, especially the strange spirit of sacrifice in the little band who came out to trick us.

We were not ready for that, for we have no such spirit of unselfishness among us. It is a virtue that Mars needs. Your very handicaps have taught you a lesson of group action—a lesson of inestimable worth. We need every one of your unique personalities in our community life. It will be a simple thing to heal you of your diseases, and to prolong your lives. The memory of your sufferings will give new youth and a new spirit to Mars—life, perhaps even prove a biological salvation. Stay with us—we wish you well. . . .”

The old man fell back exhausted—and closed his eyes. John leaped to the platform, and cried to the several hundred men and women before him, “That settles it! I’m for staying. . . .”

He made an impassioned speech and stepped down. Others followed, but he was not very attentive to their words. Hilda crept to him, unobserved in the excitement. She said, “Oh, John, my hand can be healed— Now I will be proud to marry you—as you asked me three years ago, if you still want me. . . .”

“Why, you dumb Bunny! As if a bum flipper had anything to do with that. . . .” He took her in his arms. They did not

even vote when the hands were called for—or know that the decision had been made. . . .

* * *

When the supply ship arrived, a year and a half later, there were no signs of the colony left. Spread around on the sand were various artificial limbs, crutches, spectacles, hearing devices, and bits of clothing, scattered in between many bleached and weather beaten bones. . . .

The ship’s crew gathered up these medical relics as proof and sadly turned away. The captain thought it rather a pity since the ship had been sent to bring the sick ones home, in response to a wave of indignation aroused two years before by Hilda’s broadcast from the District Hospital.

They carried a few of the bones back, carelessly scooped up by the electric shovel that gathered the crutches and other paraphernalia.

An-obscure scientist’s assistant at Johns Hopkins tried to arouse excitement by claiming that these were not human bones, but from anthropoid apes— However, there was another war brewing, and nobody would listen to him.

“We’re scrimping on Paper for Jim!”

CORPORAL JIM’s family knows that the food he eats, the ammunition he uses, the blood plasma and medical supplies which may save his life come to him in perfect condition because they are protected by paper and paperboard. That’s why they take every possible means of USING LESS PAPER. From Jim’s mother who helps the local storekeepers save paper by carrying her own market basket and never requesting useless wrapping for her purchases, to Jim’s kid brother who borrows and lends books, papers, and magazines with all his friends—the whole family is



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This advertisement, contributed to the war effort by this magazine, was prepared by the War Advertising Council in cooperation with the War Production Board and the Office of War Information

Lazarus Come Forth

By RAY BRADBURY

The Morgue Ship had gleaned information from space that would end the three hundred year war, knowledge that would defeat the aggressor Martians —if Brandon could carry it to Earth.



Illustration by Potter

LOGAN'S way of laughing was bad. "There's a new body up in the airlock, Brandon. Climb the rungs and have a look."

Logan's eyes had a green shine to them,

eager and intent. They were ugly, obscene.

Brandon swore under his breath. This room of the Morgue Ship was crowded with their two personalities. Besides that, there were scores of cold shelves of bodies

freezing quietly, and the insistent vibration of the coroner tables, machinery spinning under them. And Logan was like a little machine that never stopped talking.

"Leave me alone." Brandon rose up, tall and thinned by the years, looking as old as a pocked meteor. "Just keep quiet."

Logan sucked his cigarette. "Scared to go upstairs? Scared it might be your son we just picked up?"

Brandon reached Logan in about one stride, and while the Morgue Ship slipped on through space, he clenched the coroner's blue uniform with the small bones inside it and hung it up against the wall, pressing inward until Logan couldn't breathe. Logan blew air, his eyes looked helpless. He tried to speak and could only grunt like a stuck pig. He waved his short arms, flapping.

Brandon kept him there, crucified on a fist.

"I told you. Let me search for my own son's body in my own way. I don't need your tongue."

Logan's eyes were losing their shine, were getting blind and glazed. Brandon stepped back, releasing the little assistant. Logan bumped softly against metal flooring, his mouth hungry for air, his nostrils flaring for breath. Brandon watched the little face of Logan over the crouched, gasping body, with red color and anger shooting up into it with every passing second.

"Coward!" he threw it out of himself, Logan did. "Got yellow—neon-tubing—for your spine. Coward. Never went to war. Never did anything for Earth against Mars."

Brandon said the words in slow motion. "Shut up."

"Why?" Logan crept back, inching up the metal hull. The blood pumps under the skirts of the tables pulsed across the warm silence. "Does it hurt, the truth? Your son'd be proud of you, okay. Ha!" He coughed and spat. "He was so damn ashamed of you he went and signed up for space combat. So he got lost from his ship during a battle." Logan licked his lips very carefully. "So, to make up for it, you signed on a Morgue Ship. Try to find his body. Try to make amends. I know you. You wouldn't join the Space Warriors to fight. No guts for that. Had

to get a nice easy job on a morgue ship—"

Lines appeared in Brandon's gaunt cheeks, his eyes were closed, the lids pale. He said, and tried to believe it himself, "Someone has to pick up the bodies after the battle. They can't go flying on forever in their own orbits. They deserve burial."

The bitterness of Logan struck even deeper. "Who are you tryin' to convince?" He was on his feet now. "Me, it's different. I got a right to running this ship. I was in the other war."

"You're a liar," Brandon retorted. "You hunted radium in the asteroids with a mineral tug. You took this Morgue Ship job so you could go right on hunting radium, picking up bodies on the side."

Logan laughed softly, but not humorously. "So what? Least I'm no coward. I'll burn anybody gets in my way." He thought it over. "Unless," he added, "they give me a little money."

Brandon turned away, feeling ill. He forced himself to climb up the rungs toward that air-lock, where that fresh body lay, newly still-born from space by the retrieving-claw. His palms let wet shining prints on the rungs. His climbing feet made a soft noise in the cold metal silence.

The body lay in the cold air-lock's center, as thousands had lain before. Its posture was one of easy slumber, relaxed and not speaking ever again.

BRANDON took in his breath. Numbly he realized it was not his son. Every time a new body was found he feared and yet hoped it would be Richard. Richard of the easy laughter and good smile and dark curly hair. Richard who was now floating off somewhere toward some far eternity.

Brandon's eyes dilated. He went to his knees and with efficient darts of his eyes, he covered the vital points of this strange uniform with the young body inside it. His heart pounded briefly, and when he got up again he acted like he had been struck in the face. He walked unsteadily to the rungs.

"Logan," he called down the hole in a numbed voice. "Logan, come up here. Quick."

Logan climbed lazily up, emitting grunts and smoke.

"Look here," said Brandon, kneeling again by the body.

Logan looked and didn't believe it. "Where in hell'd you get that?"

Lying there, the face of the body was like snow framed by the ebony-black of the hair. The eyes were blue jewels caught in the snow. There were slender fingers reclining against the hips. But, most important of all, was the cut of the silver metal uniform, the grey leather belt and the bronze triangle over the silent heart with the numerals 51 on it.

Logan held onto the rungs. "Three hundred years old," he whispered it. "Three hundred years old," he said.

"Yes." The Numerals 51 were enough for Brandon. "After all these centuries, and in perfect condition. Look how calm he is. Most corpse faces aren't—pretty. Something happened, three hundred years ago, and he's been drifting, alone, ever since. I—" Brandon caught his breath.

"What's wrong?" snapped Logan.

"This man," said Brandon, wonderingly, "committed suicide."

"How do you figure?"

"There's not a mark of decompression, centrifugal force, disintegrator or ray-burn on him. He simply *stepped* out of a ship. Why should a Scientist of the 51 Circle commit suicide?"

"They had wars back there, too," said Logan. "But this is the first time I ever seen a stiff from one of them. It can't happen. He shoulda been messed up by meteors."

A strange prickling crept over Brandon. "When I was a kid, I remember thumbing through history books, reading about those famous 51 Scientists of the Circle who were doing experimental work on Pluto back in the year 2100. I memorized their uniforms, and this bronze badge. I couldn't mistake it. There was a rumor that they were experimenting with some new universal power weapon."

"A myth," said Logan.

"Who knows? Maybe. Maybe not. But before that super weapon was completed, Earth fell beneath Mar's assault. The 51-scientists destroyed themselves and their Base when the Martians came. The—myth—says that if the Martians had been only a month later—the weapon would have been out of blueprint and into metal."

Brandon stopped talking and looked at the long-boned, easily slumbering Scientist.

"And now he shows up. One of the original 51. I wonder what happened? Maybe he tried to reach Earth and had to leap into space to escape the Martians. Logan, we've got history with us, pulled in out of space, cold and stark under our hands."

Logan laughed uneasily. "Yeah. Now, if we only had that weapon. Baby, that'd be something to sing about, by God."

Brandon jerked.

Logan looked at him. "What's eating you?"

Brandon laid his fingers on the dead Scientist's skull.

"Maybe—just maybe—we *have* got the weapon," he said.

His hand trembled.

THE CORONER pumps throbbed warmly under the table, while manipulating tendrils darted swiftly, effectively over the dead Scientist's body. Brandon moved, too, like a machine. In a regular fury he had forced Logan to hurry the body down into the preparations room, inject adrenalin, thermal units, apply the blood pump and accomplish a thousand other demanding and instantaneous tasks.

"Now, out of the way, Logan. You're more trouble than help!"

Logan stumbled back. "Okay, okay. Don't get snotty. It won't work. I keep telling you. All these years."

Brandon could see nothing. Logan's voice was muffled, far away. There was only the surge of pumps, the sweating heat of the little cubicle, and niche number 12 waiting to receive this body if he failed. Brandon swallowed, tightly. Niche number 12 waiting, cold, ready, waiting for a body to fill it. He'd have to fight to keep it empty.

He began to sing-song words over and over as he injected stimulants into the body. He didn't know where the words came from, from childhood, maybe, from his old religious memories:

"Lazarus come forth," Brandon said softly, bending close, adjusting the manipulatory tendrils. "Lazarus, come forth."

Logan snorted. "Lazarus! Will you can that!"

Brandon had to talk to himself. "Inside

his brain he's got that energy weapon that Earth can use to end the war. It's been frozen in there three hundred years. If we can thaw it out—"

"Who ever heard of reviving a body after that long?"

"He's perfectly preserved. Perfectly frozen. Oh, God, this is Fate. I know it. I feel it. Came to find Richard and I found something bigger! Lazarus! Lazarus, come forth from the tomb!"

The machines thrummed louder, beating into his ears. Brandon listened, watched for just one pulse, just one beat, one word, one moment of life.

"Air for the lungs," and Brandon attached oxygen cones over the fine nose and relaxed lips. "Pressure on the ribs." Metal plates pressuring the rib case slowly out and in. "Circulation." Brandon touched the control at the foot of the table and the whole table tilted back and forth in a whining teeter-tauter.

A report clipped through on the audio:

"Morgue Ship. Battle Unit 766 calling Morgue Ship. Off orbit of Pluto 234CC, point zero-two, off 32, one by seven, follow up. Battle just terminated. Six Martian ships destroyed. One Earth ship blasted apart and bodies thrown into space. Please recover. 79 men. Bodies in orbit heading toward sun at 23456 an hour. Check."

Logan flipped his cigarette away. "That's us. We got work to do. Come on. Let that stiff cool. He'll be here when we come back."

"No!" Brandon fairly shouted it, eyes wild. "He's more important than all those men out there. We can help them later. He can help us now!"

The table came to a halt, bringing absolute silence.

Brandon bent forward to press his ear against the warmed rib-casing.

"Wait."

There it was. Unbelievably, there it was. A tiny pulse stirring like a termite down under, softly and sluggishly moving through the body, jabbing the heart and—NOW! Brandon cried out. He was shaking all over. He was setting the machine in operation again, and talking and laughing and going crazy with it.

"He's alive! He's alive! Lazarus has

come from the tomb! Lazarus reborn again! Notify Earth immediately!"

AT THE END of an hour, the pulse was timing normal, the temperature was lowering down from a fever, and Brandon moved about the preparations' room watching every quiver of the body's internal organs through the tubular-fluoroscope.

He exulted. This was having Richard alive again. It was compensation. You roared into space looking somewhere for your lost self-respect, your pride, looking for your son who is shooting on some soundless orbit into nothing, and now the biggest child of Fate is deposited in your arms to warm and bring to life. It was impossible. It was good. Brandon almost laughed. He almost forgot he had ever known fear of death. This was conquering it. This was like bringing Richard back to life, but even more. It meant things to earth and humanity; things about weapons and power and peace.

Logan interrupted Brandon's exultant thinking by blowing smoke in his face. "You know something, Brandy? This is damn good! You done something, Mister. Yeah."

"I thought I told you to notify Earth."

"Ah, I been watching you. Like a mama hen and her chick. I been thinking, too. Yeah." Logan shook ashes off his smoke. "Ever since you pulled in this prize fish, I been turning it over in my mind."

"Go up to the radio room and call Earth. We've got to rush the Scientist to Moon Base immediately. We can talk later."

There was that hard green shine to Logan's narrow eyes again. He poked a finger at Brandon. "Here's the way I get it. Do we get rewarded for finding this guy? Hell, no. It's our routine work. We're *supposed* to pick up bodies. Here we got a guy who's the key to the whole damn war."

Brandon's lips hardly moved. "Call Earth."

"Now, hold on a moment, Brandy. Let me finish this. I been thinking, maybe the Martians'd like to own him, too. Maybe they'd like to be around when he starts talking."

Brandon made a fist. "You heard what I said."

Logan put his hand behind him. "I just want to talk peaceable with you, Brandy. I don't want trouble. But all we'll get for finding this stiff is a kiss on the cheek and a medal on the chest. Hell!"

Brandon was going to hit him hard, before he saw the gun in Logan's fingers, whipped out and pointing.

"Take a look at this, Brandy, and don't lose your supper."

In spite of himself, Brandon quailed. It was almost an involuntary action. His whole body plunged back, aching, pulling with it.

"Now, let's march up to the radio room. I got a little calling to do. Get on with you. Hup!"

In the radio-room, Logan touched studs, raised a mike to his lips and said:

"Beam to Mars. Beam to Mars. Morgue Ship of Earth calling. Mars Beam answer."

After an interval, Mars gave answer. Logan said:

"I've just picked up the body of a 51 Circle Scientist. He's been resuscitated. Give me your fleet commander. I got things to talk over with him." Logan smiled. "Oh, *hello*, commander!"

HALF an hour later, the discussions were over, the plans made. Logan hung up, satisfied. Brandon looked at him as if he couldn't believe he was serious.

Back down in the control room, Logan set a course, and then forced Brandon to get the body ready. He bragged about the deal. "A half ton of radium, Brandy. Not bad, eh? Good pay. More than Earth'd ever give me for my routine duty."

Brandon shuddered. "You fool. The Martians will kill us."

"Uh-uh." Logan pantomimed him into moving the body onto a rollered table and taking it to the emergency life-craft airlock. "I'm not that dumb. I'm having you wire this emergency life-boat with explosive. We collect the minerals first. We blow up the body if the Martians act funny. We make them wait until we've collected our half and gotten five hours' start toward Earth before we allow them to pick up the body. Nice, huh?"

Brandon swayed over the task of wiring the lifeboat with explosive. "You're cutting your own throat. Handing over a

weapon like that to the Martian enemy."

It was no again from Logan. "After the Martians pick up the body and we're safely on our way home to Earth, I press a button and the whole damn thing blows up. They call it double-crossing."

"Destroy the body?"

"Hell, yes. Think I want a weapon like that turned over to the enemy? Guh!"

"The war'll go on for years."

"So Earth'll wind up winning, anyhow. We're getting along, slow but sure. And when the war's over, I got a load of radium to set myself up in business and a big future in front of me."

"So you kill millions of men, for that."

"What'd they do for me? Ruined my guts in the last war!"

There had to be some argument, something to say, quick, something to do to a man like Logan. Brandon thought, quickly. "Look, Logan, we can work this, but save the body."

"Don't be funny."

"Put one of the *other* bodies in the ship we send out. Save Lazarus' body and run back to Earth with it!" insisted Brandon.

The little assistant shook his head. "The Martians'll have an intra-material beam focused on the emergency ship when they get within one hundred thousand miles of her. They'll be able to tell then if the Body's dead or alive. No dice, Brandy."

It was hardly like leaping himself, thought Brandon. It was just frustration and rage and unthinking action. Brandon jumped. Logan hardly flicked an eyelid as he pressed the trigger of his paragon. It paralyzed the legs from under Brandon and he collapsed. The gun sprayed over his groin and chest and face, too, in a withering shower of red-hot needles. The lights went out.

THERE WAS a loose sensation of empty space, and acceleration minus power. Pure soundless momentum. Brandon forced his eyes open painfully, and found himself alone in the preparations' room, lying stretched upon one of the coroner tables, bound with metal fibre.

"Logan!" he bellowed it up through the ship. He waited. He did it again. "Logan!"

He fought the metal fibre, knotting his fists, twisting his arms. He yanked himself

back and forth. It pretty well held, except for a looseness in the right hand binding. He worked on that. Upstairs, a queer, detached Martian bass voice intoned itself.

"500,000 miles. Prepare your emergency craft with the body of the Scientist inside of it, Morgue Ship. At 300,000 miles, release the emergency craft. We'll release *our* mineral payment ship now, giving you a half hour leeway to pick it up. It contains the exact amount you asked for."

Logan's voice next:

"Good. The Scientist is alive, still, and doing well. You're getting a bargain."

Brandon's face whitened, bringing out all the hard, scared bones of it, the cheeks and brow and chin bones. He jerked against the binding and it only jumped the air from his lungs so he sobbed. Breathing deeply, he lay back. They were taking his child back out into space. Lazarus, his second son, whom he had birthed out of space with a metal retriever, they were taking back out and away from him. You can't have your real son; so you take the second best and you slap him into breathing life, into breathing consciousness, and before he is a day old they try to tear him away from you again. Brandon fairly yelled against his manacles of wire. Sweat came down his face, and the stuff from his eyes wasn't all sweat.

Logan tiptoed down the hard rungs, grinning.

"Awake, Sleeping Beauty?"

Brandon said nothing. His right hand was loosened. It was wet and loosened, working like a small white animal at his side, slipping from its wire trap.

"You can't go ahead with it, Logan."

"Why not?"

"The Earth Tribunal will find out."

"You won't tell them." Logan was doing something across the room. He was the only moving thing in front of a hundred cold shelves of sleeping warriors.

Brandon gasped, tried to get up, fell back. "How'll you fake my death?"

"With an injection of sulfacardium. Heart failure. Too much pulse on a too old heart. Simple." Logan turned and there was a hypodermic in his hand.

Brandon lay there. The ship went on and on. The body was upstairs, lying breathing in its metal cradle, mothered by

him and jerked to life by him, and now going away. Brandon managed to say:

"Do me a favor?"

"What?"

"Give me the drug now. I don't want to be awake when you send Lazarus out. I don't want that."

"Sure." Logan came walking across the deck, raising the hypodermic. It glittered hard and silver fine, and sharp.

"One more thing, Logan."

"Hurry it up!"

Only one arm free, one leg able to move slightly. Logan was pressing against the table, now. The hypodermic hesitated in his fingers.

"This!" said Brandon.

WITH one foot, Brandon kicked the teeter-tauter control at the base of the board. The board, whining, began to elevate swiftly. With his free arm, instantly pulling the last way free from the wire, Brandon clutched Logan's screaming head and jammed it down under the table, under the descending board. Board and metal base ground together and kept on going three inches. Logan screamed only once. The sounds after that were so horrible that Brandon retched. Logan's body slumped and hung, arms slack, hypo dropped and shattered on the deck.

The whole table kept going up and down, up and down.

It made Brandon sicker with each movement. The whole room revolved, tipped, spun sickly. The corpses in all their niches seemed to shiver with it.

He managed to kick the control to neutral and the table poised, elevated at the heels, so blood pounded hotly into Brandon's pale face, lighting, coloring it. His heart was pounding furiously and the chronometer upon the hull-wall clicked out time passing, time passing and miles with it, and Martians coming so much the closer. . . .

He fought the remaining wires continuously, cursing, bringing threads and beads of blood from raw wrist, ankle and hips. Red lights buzzed like insects on the ceiling, spelling out:

"ROCKET COMING . . . UNKNOWN CRAFT . . . ROCKET APPROACHING. . ."

Hold on, Lazarus. Don't let them wake

you all the way up. Don't let them take you. Better for you to go on slumbering forever.

The wire on his left wrist sprang open. It took another five minutes to bleed himself out of the ankle wires. The ship spun on, all too quickly.

Not looking at Logan's body, Brandon sprang from the table and with an infinite weariness tried to speed himself up the rungs. His mind raced ahead, but his body could only sludge rung after rung upward into the radio room. The door to the emergency rocket boat was wide and inside, living quietly, cheeks pink, pulse beating softly in throat, Lazarus lay unthinking, unknowing that his new father had come into his presence.

Brandon glanced at his wrist chronometer. Almost time to slam that door, shoving Lazarus out into space to meet the Martians. Five minutes.

He stood there, sweating. Then, decided, he put a tight audio beam straight on through to green Earth. Earth.

"Morgue Ship coming home. Morgue Ship coming home! Important cargo. Important cargo. Please meet us off the Moon!"

Setting the ship controls into an automatic mesh, he felt the thundering jets explode to life under him. It was not alone their shaking that pulsed through his body. It was something of himself, too. He was sick. He wanted to get back to Earth so badly he was violently ill with the desire. To forget all of war and death.

He could give Lazarus to the enemy and then turn homeward. Yes, he supposed he could do that. But, give up a second son where you already have given up one? No. No. Or, destroy the body now? Brandon fingered a ray-gun momentarily. Then he threw it away from him, eyes closed, swaying. No.

And if he should try to run away to Earth now? The Martians would pursue and capture him. There was no speed in a Morgue Ship to outdistance superior craft.

Brandon walked unsteadily to the side of the sleeping Scientist. He watched him a moment, touching him, looking at him with a lost light in his eyes.

Then, he began the final preparations, lifting the Scientist, going toward the life rocket.

THE MARTIANS intercepted the emergency life-rocket at 5199CVZ. The Morgue Ship itself was nowhere visible. It had already completed its arc and was driving back toward Earth.

The body of Lazarus was hurried into the hospital cubicle of the Martian rocket. The body was laid upon a table, and immediate efforts were made to bring it out of its centuries of rest.

Lazarus reclined, silver uniform belted across the middle with soft mouse-grey leather, bronze symbol 51 over the heart.

Breathlessly, the Martians crowded in about the body, probing, examining, trying, waiting. The room got very warm. The little purple eyes blinked hot and tensed.

Lazarus was breathing deeply now, sighing into full aware life, Lazarus coming from the tomb. After three hundred years of avoid death.

Armed guards stood on both sides of the medical table, weapons poised, torture mechanisms ready to make Lazarus speak if he refused to tell.

The eyes of Lazarus fluttered open. Lazarus out of the tomb. Lazarus seeing his companions, iris widening upon itself, forcing shape out of mist. Seeing the curious blue skulls of anxious Martians collected in a watching crowd about him. Lazarus living, breathing, ready to speak.

Lazarus lifted his head, curiously, parted his lips, wetted them with his tongue, and then spoke. His first words were:

"What time is it?"

It was a simple sentence, and all of the Martians bent forward to catch its significance as one of the Martians replied:

"23:45."

Lazarus nodded and closed his eyes and lay back. "Good. He's safe then, by now. He's safe."

The Martians closed in, waiting for the next important words of the waking dead.

Lazarus kept his eyes closed, and he trembled a little, as if, in spite of himself, he couldn't help it.

He said:

"My name is Brandon."

Then, Lazarus laughed. . . .

DOUBLECROSS

by JAMES Mac CREIGH

Revolt was brewing on Venus, led by the descendant of the first Earthmen to land. Svan was the leader making the final plans—plotting them a bit too well.

THE Officer of the Deck was pleased as he returned to the main lock.

There was no reason why everything shouldn't have been functioning perfectly, of course, but he was pleased to have it confirmed, all the same. The Executive Officer was moodily smoking a cigarette in the open lock, staring out over the dank Venusian terrain at the native town. He turned.

"Everything shipshape, I take it!" he commented.

The OD nodded. "I'll have a blank log if this keeps up," he said. "Every man accounted for except the delegation, cargo stowed, drivers ready to lift as soon as they come back."

The Exec tossed away his cigarette. "If they come back."

"Is there any question?"

The Exec shrugged. "I don't know, Lowry," he said. "This is a funny place. I don't trust the natives."

Lowry lifted his eyebrows. "Oh? But after all, they're human beings, just like us—"

"Not any more. Four or five generations ago they were. Lord, they don't even look human any more. Those white, flabby skins—I don't like them."

"Acclimation," Lowry said scientifically. "They had to acclimate themselves to Venus's climate. They're friendly enough."

The Exec shrugged again. He stared at the wooden shacks that were the outskirts of the native city, dimly visible through the ever-present Venusian mist. The native guard of honor, posted a hundred yards from the Earth ship, stood stolidly at attention with their old-fashioned proton-rifles slung over their backs. A few natives were gazing wonderingly at the great ship, but made no move to pass the line of guards.

"Of course," Lowry said suddenly,

"there's a minority who are afraid of us. I was in town yesterday, and I talked with some of the natives. They think there will be hordes of immigrants from Earth, now that we know Venus is habitable. And there's some sort of a paltry underground group that is spreading the word that the immigrants will drive the native Venusians—the descendants of the first expedition, that is—right down into the mud. Well—" he laughed—"maybe they will. After all, the fittest survive. That's a basic law of—"

The annunciator over the open lock clanged vigorously, and a metallic voice rasped: "Officer of the Deck! Post Number One! Instruments reports a spy ray focused on the main lock!"

Lowry, interrupted in the middle of a word, jerked his head back and stared unbelievably at the tell-tale next to the annunciator. Sure enough, it was glowing red—might have been glowing for minutes. He snatched at the hand-phone dangling from the wall, shouted into it. "Set up a screen! Notify the delegation! Alert a landing party!" But even while he was giving orders, the warning light flickered suddenly and went out. Stricken, Lowry turned to the Exec.

The Executive Officer nodded gloomily. He said, "You see!"

"YOU SEE?"

Svan clicked off the listening-machine and turned around. The five others in the room looked apprehensive. "You see?" Svan repeated. "From their own mouths you have heard it. The Council was right."

The younger of the two women sighed. She might have been beautiful, in spite of her dead-white skin, if there had been a scrap of hair on her head. "Svan, I'm afraid," she said. "Who are we to de-



Svan grunted as his fingers constricted brutally

cide if this is a good thing? Our parents came from Earth. Perhaps there will be trouble at first, if colonists come, but we are of the same blood."

Svan laughed harshly. "They don't think so. You heard them. We are not human any more. The officer said it."

The other woman spoke unexpectedly. "The Council was right," she agreed. "Svan, what must we do?"

Svan raised his hand, thoughtfully.

"One moment. Ingra, do you still object?"

The younger woman shrank back before the glare in his eyes. She looked around at the others, found them reluctant and uneasy, but visibly convinced by Svan.

"No," she said slowly. "I do not object."

"And the rest of us? Does any of us object?"

Svan eyed them, each in turn. There was a slow but unanimous gesture of assent.

"Good," said Svan. "Then we must act. The Council has told us that we alone will decide our course of action. We have agreed that, if the Earth ship returns, it means disaster for Venus. Therefore, it must not return."

An old man shifted restlessly. "But they are strong, Svan," he complained. "They have weapons. We cannot force them to stay."

Svan nodded. "No. They will leave. But they will never get back to Earth."

"Never get back to Earth?" the old man gasped. "Has the Council authorized—murder?"

Svan shrugged. "The Council did not know what we would face. The Councilmen could not come to the city and see what strength the Earth ship has." He paused dangerously. "Toller," he said, "do you object?"

Like the girl, the old man retreated before his eyes. His voice was dull. "What is your plan?" he asked.

Svan smiled, and it was like a dark flame. He reached to a box at his feet, held up a shiny metal globe. "One of us will plant this in the ship. It will be set by means of this dial—" he touched a spot on the surface of the globe with a pallid finger—"to do nothing for forty hours. Then—it will explode. Atomite."

He grinned triumphantly, looking from face to face. The grin faded uncertainly as he saw what was in their eyes—uncertainty, irresolution. Abruptly he set the bomb down, savagely ripped six leaves off a writing tablet on the table next him. He took a pencil and made a mark on one of them, held it up.

"We will let chance decide who is to do the work," he said angrily. "Is there anyone here who is afraid? There will be danger, I think. . . ."

No answer. Svan jerked his head. "Good," he said. "Ingra, bring me that bowl."

Silently the girl picked up an opaque glass bowl from the broad arm of her chair. It had held Venus-tobacco cigarettes; there were a few left. She shook them out and handed the bowl to Svan, who was rapidly creasing the six fatal slips. He dropped them in the bowl, stirred it with his hand, offered it to the girl. "You first, Ingra," he said.

She reached in mechanically, her eyes intent on his, took out a slip and held it without opening it. The bowl went the rounds, till Svan himself took the last. All eyes were on him. No one had looked at their slips.

Svan, too, had left his unopened. He sat at the table, facing them. "This is the plan," he said. "We will go, all six of us, in my ground car, to look at the Earth ship. No one will suspect—the whole city has been to see it already. One will get out, at the best point we can find. It is almost dusk now. He can hide, surely, in the vegetation. The other five will start back. Something will go wrong with the car—perhaps it will run off the road, start to sink in the swamp. The guards will be called. There will be commotion—that is easy enough, after all; a hysterical woman, a few screams, that's all there is to it. And the sixth person will have his chance to steal to the side of the ship. The bomb is magnetic. It will not be noticed in the dark—they will take off before sunrise, because they must travel away from the sun to return—in forty hours the danger is removed."

There was comprehension in their eyes, Svan saw . . . but still that uncertainty. Impatiently, he cracked: "Look at the slips!"

Though he had willed his eyes away from it, his fingers had rebelled. Instinctively they had opened the slip, turned it over and over, striving to detect if it was the fatal one. They had felt nothing. . . .

And his eyes saw nothing. The slip was blank. He gave it but a second's glance, then looked up to see who had won the lethal game of chance. Almost he was disappointed.

Each of the others had looked in that same second. And each was looking up now, around at his neighbors. Svan waited impatiently for the chosen one to announce it—a second, ten seconds. . . .

Then gray understanding came to him. *A traitor!* his subconscious whispered. *A coward!* He stared at them in a new light, saw their indecision magnified, became opposition.

Svan thought faster than ever before in his life. If there was a coward, it would do no good to unmask him. All were wavering, any might be the one who

had drawn the fatal slip. He could insist on inspecting every one, but—suppose the coward, cornered, fought back? In fractions of a second, Svan had considered the evidence and reached his decision. Masked by the table, his hand, still holding the pencil, moved swiftly beneath the table, marked his own slip.

In the palm of his hand, Svan held up the slip he had just marked in secret. His voice was very tired as he said. "I will plant the bomb."

THE SIX conspirators in Svan's old ground car moved slowly along the main street of the native town. Two Earth-ship sailors, unarmed except for deceptively flimsy-looking pistols at their hips, stood before the entrance to the town's Hall of Justice.

"Good," said Svan, observing them. "The delegation is still here. We have ample time."

He half turned in the broad front seat next the driver, searching the faces of the others in the car. Which was the coward? he wondered. Ingra? Her aunt? One of the men?

The right answer leaped up at him. *They all are*, he thought. *Not one of them understands what this means. They're afraid.*

He clamped his lips. "Go faster, Ingra," he ordered the girl who was driving. "Let's get this done with."

She looked at him, and he was surprised to find compassion in her eyes. Silently she nodded, advanced the fuel-handle so that the clumsy car jolted a trace more rapidly over the corduroy road. It was quite dark now. The car's driving light flared yellowishly in front of them, illuminating the narrow road and the pale, distorted vegetation of the jungle that surrounded them. Svan noticed it was raining a little. The present shower would deepen and intensify until midnight, then fall off again, to halt before morning. But before then they would be done.

A proton-bolt lanced across the road in front of them. In the silence that followed its thunderous crash, a man's voice belatedly: "Halt!"

The girl, Ingra, gasped something indistinguishable, slammed on the brakes. A Venusian in the trappings of the State Guard advanced on them from the side

of the road, proton-rifle held ready to fire again.

"Where are you going?" he growled.

Svan spoke up. "We want to look at the Earth ship," he said. He opened the door beside him and stepped out, careless of the drizzle. "We heard it was leaving tonight," he continued, "and we have not seen it. Is that not permitted?"

The guard shook his head sourly. "No one is allowed near the ship. The order was just issued. It is thought there is danger."

Svan stepped closer, his teeth bared in what passed for a smile. "It is urgent," he purred. His right hand flashed across his chest in a complicated gesture. "Do you understand?"

Confusion furrowed the guard's hairless brows, then was replaced by a sudden flare of understanding—and fear. "The Council!" he roared. "By heaven, yes, I understand! You are the swine that caused this—" He strove instinctively to bring the clumsy rifle up, but Svan was faster. His gamble had failed; there was only one course remaining. He hurled his gross white bulk at the guard, bowled him over against the splintery logs of the road. The proton-rifle went flying, and Svan savagely tore at the throat of the guard. Knees, elbows and claw-like nails—Svan battered at the astonished man with every ounce of strength in his body. The guard was as big as Svan, but Svan had the initial advantage . . . and it was only a matter of seconds before the guard lay unconscious, his skull a mass of gore at the back where Svan had ruthlessly pounded it against the road.

Svan rose, panting, stared around. No one else was in sight, save the petrified five and the ground car. Svan glared at them contemptuously, then reached down and heaved on the senseless body of the guard. Over the shoulder of the road the body went, onto the damp swampland of the jungle. Even while Svan watched the body began to sink. There would be no trace.

Svan strode back to the car. "Hurry up," he gasped to the girl. "Now there is danger for all of us, if they discover he is missing. And keep a watch for other guards."

VENUS has no moon, and no star can shine through its vast cloud layer. Ensign Lowry, staring anxiously out through the astro-dome in the bow of the Earth-ship, cursed the blackness.

"Can't see a thing," he complained to the Exec, steadily writing away at the computer's table. "Lpok—are those lights over there?"

The Exec looked up wearily. He shrugged. "Probably the guards. Of course, you can't tell. Might be a raiding party."

Lowry, stung, looked to see if the Exec was smiling, but found no answer in his stolid face. "Don't joke about it," he said. "Suppose something happens to the delegation?"

"Then we're in the soup," the Exec said philosophically. "I told you the natives were dangerous. Spy-rays! They've been prohibited for the last three hundred years."

"It isn't all the natives," Lowry said. "Look how they've doubled the guard around us. The administration is co-operating every way they know how. You heard the delegation's report on the intercom. It's this secret group they call the Council."

"And how do you know the guards themselves don't belong to it?" the Exec retorted. "They're all the same to me. . . . Look, your light's gone out now. Must have been the guard. They're on the wrong side to be coming from the town, anyhow. . . ."

SVAN HESITATED only a fraction of a second after the girl turned the lights out and stopped the car. Then he reached in the compartment under the seat. If he took a little longer than seemed necessary to get the atomite bomb out of the compartment, none of the others noticed. Certainly it did not occur to them that there had been *two* bombs in the compartment, though Svan's hand emerged with only one.

He got out of the car, holding the sphere. "This will do for me," he said. "They won't be expecting anyone to come from behind the ship—we were wise to circle around. Now, you know what you must do?"

Ingra nodded, while the others remained mute. "We must circle back again," she parroted. "We are to wait five minutes, then drive the car into the swamp. We will create a commotion, attract the guards."

Svan, listening, thought: *It's not much of a plan. The guards would not be drawn away. I am glad I can't trust these five any more. If they must be destroyed, it is good that their destruction will serve a purpose.*

Aloud, he said, "You understand. If I get through, I will return to the city on foot. No one will suspect anything if I am not caught, because the bomb will not explode until the ship is far out in space. Remember, you are in no danger from the guards."

From the guards, his mind echoed. He smiled. At least, they would feel no pain, never know what happened. With the amount of atomite in that bomb in the compartment, they would merely be obliterated in a ground-shaking crash.

Abruptly he swallowed, reminded of the bomb that was silently counting off the seconds. "Go ahead," he ordered. "I will wait here."

"Svan." The girl, Ingra, leaned over to him. Impulsively she reached for him, kissed him. "Good luck to you, Svan," she said.

"Good luck," repeated the others. Then silently the electric motor of the car took hold. Skilfully the girl backed it up, turned it around, sent it lumbering back down the road. Only after she had traveled a few hundred feet by the feel of the road did she turn the lights on again.

Svan looked after them. The kiss had surprised him. What did it mean? Was it an error that the girl should die with the others?

There was an instant of doubt in his steel-shackled mind, then it was driven away. Perhaps she was loyal, yet certainly she was weak. And since he could not know which was the one who had received the marked slip, and feared to admit it, it was better they all should die.

He advanced along the midnight road to where the ground rose and the jungle plants thinned out. Ahead, on an elevation, were the rain-dimmed lights of the

Earth-ship, set down in the center of a clearing made by its own fierce rockets. Svan's mist-trained eyes spotted the circling figures of sentries, and knew that these would be the ship's own. They would not be as easily overcome as the natives, not with those slim-shafted blast-ers they carried. Only deceit could get him to the side of the ship.

Svan settled himself at the side of the road, waiting for his chance. He had perhaps three minutes to wait; he reckoned. His fingers went absently to the pouch in his wide belt, closed on the slip of paper. He turned it over without looking at it, wondering who had drawn the first cross, and been a coward. Ingra? One of the men?

HE BECAME abruptly conscious of a commotion behind him. A ground car was racing along the road. He spun around and was caught in the glare of its blinding driving-light, as it bumped to a slithering stop.

Paralyzed, he heard the girl's voice. "Svan! They're coming! They found the guard's rifle, and they're looking for us! Thirty Earthmen, Svan, with those frightful guns. They fired at us, but we got away and came for you. We must flee!"

He stared unseeingly at the light. "Go away!" he croaked unbelievably. Then his muscles jerked into action. The time was almost up—the bomb in the car—

"Go away!" he shrieked, and turned to run. His fists clenched and swinging at his side, he made a dozen floundering steps before something immense pounded at him from behind. He felt himself lifted from the road, sailing, swooping, dropping

with annihilating force onto the hard, charred earth of the clearing. Only then did he hear the sound of the explosion, and as the immense echoes died away he began to feel the pain seeping into him from his hideously racked body. . . .

The Flight Surgeon rose from beside him. "He's still alive," he said callously to Lowry, who had just come up. "It won't last long, though. What've you got there?"

Lowry, a bewildered expression on his beardless face, held out the two halves of a metallic sphere. Dangling ends of wires showed where a connection had been broken. "He had a bomb," he said. "A magnetic-type, delayed-action atomite bomb. There must have been another in the car, and it went off. They—they were planning to bomb us."

"Amazing," the surgeon said dryly. "Well, they won't do any bombing now."

Lowry was staring at the huddled, mutilated form of Svan. He shuddered. The surgeon, seeing the shudder, grasped his shoulder.

"Better them than us," he said. "It's poetic justice if I ever saw it. They had it coming. . . ." He paused thoughtfully, staring at a piece of paper between his fingers. "This is the only part I don't get," he said.

"What's that?" Lowry craned his neck. "A piece of paper with a cross on it? What about it?"

The surgeon shrugged. "He had it clenched in his hand," he said. "Had the devil of a time getting it loose from him." He turned it over slowly, displayed the other side. "Now what in the world would he be doing carrying a scrap of paper with a cross marked on both sides?"





THE VIZIGRAPH

Gather around, you Vizifans, for here is the latest crop of sense and nonsense sent in by you to whom this department belongs. We think you'll like the missives chosen for this Issue, for there are new writers along with the old, and running them sharp competition in the matter of unloading a few gripes or bits of praise.

We're a little sorry that some of that frothy, effervescent touch has gone from many of the letters. Heck, fellas, statistics are nice, as we explained to a fan named Sanford a short while back, but we also like the kick of excitement that ran through your epistles of days gone by. Life would be tough without a sense of humor; so how about dropping some of those rib-tickers you once sent in. Just to be fair, we'll make a choice of the letters, independent of the regular voting, and send out a few originals to the most clever.

The old rules still hold. Two double-spaced typewritten pages are the limit, for we'd like to print more of the letters, and that cannot be done unless you Vizifans cooperate.

So come on, *give*. This is a no-hold-barred department. Get mad, be amused, be amusing, or pick a fight—we don't care. Just be in good taste, and keep 'em coming.

The winners of the Fall Issue contest should drop a card indicating their choices for the Summer Issue. They are:

1—Wilkie Conner 2—Rose Jacobwitz 3—Chas McNutt

HEH! HEH! HEH!

84 Baker Avenue,
Dover, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR:

The grulzak looked greedily at her, its bulbous eyes sparkling with unholy flame. A few yards away, her face a mask of frozen terror, crouched the trembling heroine. The grulzak drooled happily. The yellowed saliva dribbled down, forming a little pool on the floor. Eagerly, the hideous monstrosity stretched out a spotted tenacle, wrapped it around her, squeezed hard (the utter cad!), and relentlessly drew her forward. Its cavernous mouth yawned, exposing jagged molars. *Snap!* Where the innocent girl's head had been, was a jagged cavity from which the gore spilled forth generously. (Hehehehehehe!!) *Snap!* No arm! (Ahahaha!) *Snap!* No leg! The grulzak nearly lost its balance, since the seeping blood (still warm) made the metal surface quite slippery. (Hawhawhawhaw!!!) *Snap!* (Tee-heeheehe!!) *Snap!* (Ohohohohoho!) *Snap!* (Not much left! Hehhehehehehehehe!!)

The preceding opus was inspired by some of PLANET's last few covers. Aren't we *devils*?

Thanks a lot, Mr. Peacock, for the luscious originals. And many thanks to the guys wot voted me first in the Viz. Tho I certainly didn't deserve it, I like originals as much as anybody else. Oh, indubitably.



This time I ain't gonna even mention the stories in the Summer PS. Why not? Because I have just come to the sudden and horrifying realization that nobody cares what I think o' the yarns. Isn't that amazing? Me neither. Oweli. Now. What to fill this up with? A difficult problem. Yes, indeed. Hmmmmmmm. Lezee. Nope. That wouldn't do. Ahem. And ahem again. Tralalalala. Hmmmmmmmmmmm. Eureka! I got it! Ha! I shall rate the letters in the Viz. Hqw clever. Yup. Uh-huh. You bet. 'Tis a wonder nobody ever thought of it before.

First to Art Sehnert. Nothing better to occupy key spot. Lovely poem. M-using. Me likeum. Give him a PK and let him share the infinite joy of getting an original. Ah, yes.

Shall we award second to Francis Laney? Dawgone! He always comes up with a nice, sincere letter. How true. Mmmmmmm.

Third to Ray Karden, tho he'll probably cop first. Too high-falutin'. Mixed me up. Pull up a chair and put yer feet on the stove, Ray, while I tell you my theory of electronics.

After reading this over, I find that I seem conceited. Could be. But what fan isn't? (Faughhh! There go my chances of winning another original!)

Before closing, I offer some more of this delightful torture—namely my poetry. Do not confuse our product with imitators. Look for the green and purple wrappers.

THE STARS

Looking out of the porthole I can see
Lotsa stars lookin' back at me;
They look like lights on a shootin' gallery,
Or beetles on a hunk o' celery.

(Pause for Air)

The stars look grim and cold,
As their beams carve the night;
But of course, they ain't
They're really 5673 degrees Fahrenheit.

Mit best vishes,

JOE KENNEDY.

IDIOT LESSER?

616 N. Topeka,
Wichita, Kan.

DEAR SIR:

I see where your fans are mad at Mr. Buchanan for not thinking very highly of their mentality. I have to agree with him. Ever since you started the magazine most of your readers have apparently been on the mental level of idiots. I never heard even a six-year-old talk that way and so I can only assume that for some strange reason, as soon as they pick up a pen, their mind blanks out and the hand moves of its own accord.

Remember Gert Stein of "a rose is a rose is a rose" fame? That is the explanation given for the way she writes and it is the only credible explanation for the others writing the way they do.

Fortunately you have fewer letters of this sort in your latest issue than you have had for a long time. Milt Lesser's letter was the worst one. Judging from the way he writes I picture him as having the face of an idiot. He goes around with a silly grin on his face. He keeps rubbing his hands together and keeps up a constant and meaningless chortle. In fact he is a perfect example of a micro-ceppalic idiot.

EDWIN SIGLER.

PAGING DICK TRACY!

Box 1094,
Dickinson, N. Dak.

DEAR WILBUR S.:

Don't mind the friendly and informal salutation. We've met before, and I'm never one to stand on ceremony. (He said as he tramped it in the dust.)

Browsing through the Vizigraph amid the outraged yells of the manager to put that blank blanked blanking book back on the rack or pay for it, I saw these letters: O BUT G! Therefore, I proceeded to do just that (put it back). Three days later I was unable to resist any longer, and pulling out my keyring, set about unlocking my pocketbook. Then, I happened to see in his meanderings, the observation to stf authors, apropos supersonic guns, to hurry up. For his information several stories on this subject have been published, and I know from first-hand experience that interdimensional travel due to experimentations with supersonic vibrations is evidently considered by the editors to be a taboo subject. Or maybe they don't like the way I present same. At any rate, they have a distinct aversion to any efforts on my part which are aimed at the goal of shooting me into print, and some poor hero into the fourth dimension, by the medium of sound. But, on to further horizons.

For this issue: pardon me while I take a swig of fortification.

No. 1. *Warrior of Two Worlds*. . . . This gets about 92%, but I still think that M. W. Wellman should stick to fantasy instead of stf.

No. 2. *Terror Out of Space*. . . . This runs such a close second that I must give it 92%, too. I don't know why I didn't give it more. Foul mood, I guess. In a way it was really the best story in the book.

No. 3. *Minions of the Crystal Sphere*. . . . I couldn't quite follow this at points but it was well written. Give it 89%.

No. 4. *One Against the Stars*. . . . This story was really better, to my mind, than *Minions*. I guessed the outcome, but it appealed to me. Because it is short, however, it takes fourth with about 82%.

Mr. Meek and *Morgue Ship* are tied for the next two places. Because *Mr. Meek* was longer, it gains a tie. *Morgue Ship* was really the better story, but *Meek* was good for a lot of laughs.

Now for the dissecting room, variously known as the Vizigraph, Wilbur's folly, the editor's conscience, etc.; I am slightly confused as to the meaning of Elliot's last paragraph, wherein he says: "Til bet they don't know just how typical it is, nor just what it is they 'Can always depend on.'" But we know—don't we? Oh, brother—I For Gripe's sake, let's give credit where credit is due!" That had all the earmarks of a dirty crack!

These letters knocking Cummings. Well, I suppose the government has to get money somehow, but there oughta be a law against such slander through the mails.

Continuing in the same vein of stagnated blood (Spring Fever's hit me) I come across a letter signed, "Banks Mebane." Is this male, female or non-belligerent? If female, of what age, and all other particulars which might be interesting. Height, eyes, hair, complexion, etc.

Women, *Women*, WOMEN. Now they don't like the Vizigraph. I bet that when the first two cavemen had a fight, it was over a woman, and

not over who got the biggest piece of dinosaur! But I'm like a moth and a candle. Fatal fascination and all that sort of stuff.

Hmmmm. Pardon the last paragraph. I just met the last letter. So you want a man, do you Mara? Well, I've got Palanth beat all hollow. Another one on whom I want full particulars. Where's the nearest detective agency?

Ho, hum, guess that's all. Hallelujah, brothers!

As ever,

GUY TRUCANO, JR.

NO LOVE, NO NOTHIN'

Star Route, Licking Pike,
Newport, Kentucky.

DEAR EDITOR:

I'm back, proving that although lightning may not be able to strike twice in the same place, disaster can. The Summer ish was a little better than the preceding one in over-all content. Here goes:

The cover. Oh boy! Whatta shape—the world's in. It's a swell cover, especially from the wolfish point of view. The color job was superb, for it managed to be striking without blinding you. But I don't like the subject matter. Sex rears its not-too-ugly head a little too often. Having dishabile females on the cover cheapens the mag appallingly, especially when they seem to be there simply because they're dishabile females. What story did it illustrate? (How should we know; we only edit the mag! Ed.)

Try to avoid covers of that type, for they don't help lessen criticism of sfantasy. Young readers have trouble with their parents because those covers give a certain impression of the material therein. . . . Did you ever notice the way bystanders leer at you as much as if to say, "Hah! Pornography!"? If I was sensitive, it might bother me, but as it is, I just leer right back at them and let them think what they want to. So please, Mr. Editor, get rid of the nudes, and make PLANET more (hah hah) adult.

If my ranting against sex has given you the idea that I am a prude, let me dispel it at once. I am a charter member of TASOWAW (The American Society of Wolves and Wolfesses), but leave the sex angle to Thorne Smith.

The stories at last.

1. *Minions of the Crystal Sphere*—My introduction to DePina was an enjoyable experience. His style is so vivid that you feel you live the stories with the characters, and it takes real writing to do that.

2. *One Against the Stars*—A very moving story. Doggonit, it even got old hard-hearted me feeling sorry for Joe.

3. *Morgue Ship*—I'd never thought of this ghoulsh aspect of future wars. Tsk, tsk, the interplanetary meat-wagon. Your authors are making me soft-hearted. Again I sympathize with the hero.

4. *Terror Out of Space*—O-Trail Brackett they used to call her. It was good, but it didn't approach *The Jewel of Bas*, and small wonder, imagine two classics in two issues!

5. *Warrior of Two Worlds*—Wellman is one of my favorite authors, but this story just didn't ring the bell with me.

6. *Mr. Meek—Musketeer*—The thing read too much like a comic strip or fairy tale. I've often wondered what happened to Mr. Meek when

he went off the air. Now I know. He should have stayed on the air. I'm surprised at Simak. He's usually much better than this. No more "wishful thinking" type of stories, please.

I'd like to see one of your authors write a story based upon the actions and reactions of a group of sfantasy writers and fans to an interplanetary invasion. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I'm tempted to write such a story myself. It should be an interesting subject, for I imagine we would be the most skeptical of the skeptics as to the reality of such a happening. Familiarity breeds contempt in most amazing quantities. Wouldn't Bradbury be surprised to wake up some morning and find one of his Venusian "spiders" waving a heat-blast at him. Why not set one of your writers to work on it?

The best illustration was by Rubimor for *Warriors of Two Worlds*. Elias was quite a bit off in his illustration for *Minions of the Crystal Sphere*, because Perlac in the pic was definitely not the type of girl that could be mistaken for a man.

I'll close by reminding you, don't insist on having a love interest in every story. Do you know what my favorite song is? "No Love, No Nothin'!"

Yours truly,
STANLEY SKIRVIN,

NONSENSE?

East Bremerton, Wash.

DEAR MR. PEACOCK:

Ye Vizi-fans! Rise! Sing praises, give cheers! The austere Vizi-laureate solemnly nears.

From the bourne of Infinity, leaving his nest In the middle of Nothingness to manifest Himself to his subjects, the Vizi-fan folk; So, heed ye, and cherish each word that is spoke, Detaching his tail and folding his wings; Changing his crust for the skin of Worldlings; Withdrawing his horns and retracting his claws He becomes like a man and obeys Natural laws.

Now, list while he sings you the guilt and the grace

Of the authors, those prophets of things out in space:

Ray Cummings, I charge thy accounts are untrue, And thy name appears not in the stellar "Who's Who."

And Bond! Just because you have seen past the stars

Is no reason to lie about Venus and Mars.

DePina, prepare, when you've left this drab sphere

To pay for your libels on stars far and near.

And Brackett? A lady! Your sins are not hid.

And I can't understand why you done what you did.

Ray Bradbury, why put you horrors in Space?

They're all in your cranium and that is their place. Mr. Peacock, adventure is *primitive* stuff;

There's none in the *Future*, the *Past* had enough.

So, standing in grandeur, salaamed by the Vizi,

The austere Vizi-laureate then became busy

Attaching his tail and unfolding his wings,

Changing to crust his skin of Worldlings,

Projecting his horns and unsheathing his claws

And vanished again into Nothing, because . . .

I do not pretend it is good, but I got into the spirit of the Vizigraph after reading the letters, and, as I knew nothing to interest the other readers, having read almost none of that type of fiction, I thought this nonsense might get by.

Sincerely,
M. W. STEPHENS,

COLLAPSING VIZI!

225 Second St.,
California, Pa.

DEAR PEACOCK:

The news dealer placed four copies of PLANET on the stand and three of them disappeared immediately. I don't know who the other two fellows were but the three of us smiled mutually and I, at least, wended a sprightly way home and within two hours had finished the mag from frontpiece to "Sincerely, Mara Baldwin."

Must say that the Summer ish. was a honey. One of the most interesting collections of stories yet to be found between the covers of PLANET. YOU, Ed, are choosing much better stories.

One not to pull punches; what in the name of all the little red Gryffs on Venus has happened to the Viz.? Honestly this dept. has actually become something to comment upon. The Viz. is dying for lack of zip—if you get the point. None of the old-time palaver between the fans. None of the irony of the old discussion corner. What has become of all those erstwhile Viziers who were not afraid to speak their individual minds. Are those of the present school "afraid" of honest criticism? Are they afraid that their letter might not be printed if they express their honest opinion. All in all I think most of them—MOST of them mind you, not all—are a bunch of fellows looking for an original drawing and thinking that they must agree with and appreciate all that appears between the covers of PLANET or stand no chance of ever seeing an original illustration adorning the wall of the old den. I, for one, know that this is not so. Being one to offer my own opinion as well as wording same in a wholeheartedly honest manner, I yet find a number of pics in my humble possession. Anyhoo, this letter might—I say might—help to pep up some of these guys whose vocabularies are solely comprised of the words; swell—grand—marvelous—none—better—the best—etc.

Warrior of Two Worlds by Wellman took top place in the line up of good stories for the Summer Issue. In this yarn we have all it takes to furnish a reader with an interesting piece of reading material. Containing that hidden quality of plot surprise so indicative of M. W., the story, as a whole rightly takes first place.

Minions of the Crystal Sphere by DePina: The literary descriptive power of this writer is something for the others in the field to achieve to better their yarns.

Mr. Meek—Musketeer by Simak takes the No. 3 spot. Something of fantasy in this tale and being at heart a lover of Fantasy must rate this yarn above *One Against the Stars*, a better put together story but lacking the fantasy angle which fact puts it in fourth place. (Do you know, Ed, that PLANET is the one and only definitely stf. mag which I read?)

Morgue Ship, the stately little piece by Bradbury, hits spot No. 5 only because of the briefness of the thing. More lengthy stories, Ray, and you'll hit the top of Heiner's ratemeter yet.

The off-trail novelet was anything but that. I've read and re-read the story sequence in sundry yarns.

Now for the illustrations: Elias' on page 3. The best, Rubimor on page 75. Now there is a piece to praise. I'll rate it equally with Elias'. Ingels is fair—Doolin not so hot.

The cover—more of Gross.

Yours as ever,
V. R. HEINER.

HAIL AND FAREWELL!

Star Route, Licking Pike,
Newport, Kentucky

DEAR MR. PEACOCK:

Okay! So it wasn't too good! So it stunk! But it was the child of my brain, and you threw it into the wastepaper can. I weep tears of deepest sorrow. (I'm speaking of my first letter to P.S. What can you expect when there aren't any really good pics to try for?) However, the pics are considerably better this issue, and the stories are excellent.

1. *The Eyes of Thar*—The fact that Kuttner let the alien remain alien delighted me. And his picture of the other universe was a fine bit of writing.

2. *Highwayman of the Void*—Well-written thud and blunder.

3. *The Soul Eaters*—Same.

4. *The Citadel of Death*—More thud and blunder.

5. *Mr. Meek Plays Polo*—I didn't like the first story either. Utterly illogical and impractical.

6. *Doctor Universe*—More of the wishy-washy type. Same as the *Mr. Meek* series.

7. *Men Without a World*—I just don't like stories which depict aliens with the dominant characteristics of the Japs.

The interiors were head and shoulders above those in the preceding two issues, but there is still a long way to go. The cover, as usual, is inaccurate. Also, it is not so hot, since the artwork is not as good as last time. There is much room for improvement in PLANET, and the best place to start would be with the cover. I have 16 issues of PLANET in my possession, and the cover of every one has the eternal triangle: a BEM, a bim, and a bum. Why? Surely the fans have better taste than that. The covers that are remembered are not those with semi-nude females, but rather those with scenes on other planets, (authentic scenes!), spacial scenes, future war scenes, etc.

The Vizigraph is still by far the best letter column. You know, 'm enjoying the controversy Buchanan has stirred up. To judge from his letter, he seems to be enjoying himself. Perhaps I wouldn't enjoy it so much if I was one of those who had been flaunting my ego in P. S. I give Joe Kennedy my vote for best letter. (Mebbe it's because he likes Brackett too.) Paul Carter gets second, and Wilkie Conner gets third for his letter which struck me as being rather hooverous.

Frankly, I think Brackett's *The Jewel of Bas* was one of the best fantasies that has been written for some time. Also, I think that most of those who panned it were rather young. A lack of appreciation of fantasy seems to be a characteristic of the younger fans. I was that way myself at one time. I think that Brackett is one of the best stfantasy authors writing today, bar none. Her style is certainly the most vivid. She has that knack of making you a part of the story which Mannion described so well some time ago. Since genius is seldom recognized when it presents itself, I honestly believe she will be one of the greats of stfantasy.

I can't believe it myself, but I've had a change of heart about Cummings. I just found out that Austin Hall was a writer of hack, just as Cummings, yet his masterpieces have endeared him to the hearts of fanatasy lovers. Why shouldn't Cummings be treated the same. No one can deny

that he has written some great stories. But let this be fair warning to Mr. Cummings. If he should write another of those putrid things he used to have in P. S., I'll be out for his blood again.

I'm running out of space, doggonit! And so much to say! I'll content myself with saying that PLANET is the *third* best mag in the field, and with a few improvements, there is no reason why it can't be up there at the top. With good covers, fewer formula stories, and support of the fans . . . well, who knows.

Consider yourself honored, Mr. Peacock. It isn't everybody that would spend his last few hours as a civilian typing a letter to a mag. And you'd better print this one, cause it's the last typewritten one you're going to get.

Sincerely,

E. Z. KARPIN.

WELCOME TO SELWYN!

94 Lincoln Street,
Brighton, Mass.

DEAR EDITOR:

I was certainly surprised when I picked up the Summer Issue and saw my letter. Really, I should resent that B. O. crack, but I suppose it was only a joke. Ahem! Also, I noticed that you deleted a word or two. G-r-r-r! If I were Lesser, I'd probably send you a time-bomb through the mail. But alas, I am only the mad astronomer, so, without further ado, (No Chad! Don't) I'll proceed to the business at hand.

Inside pics: Doolin for Wylie takes first. He changed his style a bit, I see. Elias for Selwyn takes second place, followed by Ingels for Simak, Ingels for Conover, Doolin for Kuttner and Ingels for Jacobi. Kieme, whoever he is, was awful. The cover was only fair. The stories, though, don't measure up to those in last ish, were pretty good.

1. *The Soul Eaters*, by William Conover. Well, Well, and Well! Fan becomes an author. Not bad. More like this, and we have another DePina in the making.

2. *The Citadel of Death*, by Carl Selwyn, and *Highwayman of the Void*, by Dirk Wylie. Two swell yarns by a pair of my old favorites. Particularly, I welcome Selwyn back. I haven't seen a story by him since *Venus Has Green Eyes*, in the Fall 1940 ish of PLANET.

3. *Mr. Meek Plays Polo*, by Clifford D. Simak. Crowded out by Selwyn and Wylie. Part of a long series, I hope.

4. *Men Without a World*, by Joseph Farrell.

5. *Doctor Universe*, by Carl Jacobi.

6. *The Eyes of Thar*, by Henry Kuttner. Awful!

What's this about. You claiming that P. S. isn't STF? What is it, then? What happened to the off-trail yarn? How come no novel this ish? By the way I see that you answered one fan's plea. Any chance of obtaining the Summer 1942, Issue of P. S.? My collection is complete save for this one ish. I wait with bated breath. (Send the quarter, Bub. Ed.)

Alan Mannon takes first place in Le Vizi once more. There should be a law against that guy. Wilms Herbert takes second, closely followed by Joe Kennedy. Most of the letters last issue didn't rate Le Vizi's contents. Come on fans, get on the ball.

Sincerely,

BILL TERRIO,
The Mad Astronomer.

US DO WORSE? HA!

DEAR MR. PEACOCK:

Glad to see Laney in the Vizigraph. He is what might be termed "an expert on advising mags," although he is to be found far more in the fan field than in the pro. You might do well to follow some of his advice; you could do a lot worse.

I wholeheartedly agree with him about your covers—they are far below the level you set for your written material. Let the nauseating attempt at one upon your Summer Issue stand as an all-too-lurid example. After thoroughly perusing that issue in search of the story it illustrates, I am forced to presume the original idea (and that was all) came from *Terror Out of Space*. If so, where did the water-breathing female come from? The only ones to be found in the story were the submarine vegetable people (four feet tall) and the gal with nothing where her eyes should have been (two feet tall). The cover gal not only had eyes, but they were predominantly set off by an overdose of mascara and eye-shadow. Furthermore, in the excellent interior of Cyline's, and according to Miss Brackett, the guy wore a complete suit, not merely a helmet. I'd rather not go into the monster, if you please. (Aw, go on in! Ed.)

Why not try a really artistic cover just once, dispensing with the frightful (???) monster and the female beauties (again ???) who have neglected to put all their clothes on. I think Rozen could do a good job of it, and I'll bet your circulation of that issue would show a marked increase. (Sorry, Rozen not available.—Ed.)

As far as off-trail stories are concerned, I'm for them if they seem to be worth-while and still withholding some semblance of science-fiction. As examples in this instance, we might take a look at two tales of Miss Brackett: her quite poor *Jewel of Bas* and her admirable *Terror Out of Space*. I think the rereading of these two stories will amply show you what I think is the main thing wrong with many of your stories: excruciating vagueness.

Understand now, I do not advocate long-winded and monotonous passages of description, but I do believe that a clear and lucid picture could be obtained with just a bit more care in story construction and handling. The worst fault you have in this line is an annoying habit of jerky and rapid movement. I realize that action requires fast movement, but, if carefully handled, it can do so in a very smooth manner. (De Pina's *Minions of the Crystal Sphere*, on page 19, excites your interest by saying the hero has a plan for inciting revolt on "every tier." The next thing you hear is that the plan had worked, but how? What was the plan?) Another trick would be to eliminate all descriptions and use of characters not essential to the story.

It wasn't until I had finally finished *Jewel of Bas* that I realized the action was taking place within a hollow planet. Perhaps I wasn't giving the story my fullest concentration and attention; at any rate, it knocked my entire conception of the scene into a cocked-hat. (Ours, too, *We* didn't know that, Ed.)

I'm afraid, Mr. Peacock, that I have really run good old PLANET down just a bit too much in this little missive, but I'm seriously enough trying to improve the mag, and, maybe now that I've got all the above off my chest, I'll be able to send you another letter full of warm and honest praise.

Sincerely yours,

ANDY ANDERSON. ^

HO HUM! BUCHANON AGAIN!

68 Madbury Rd.
Durham, N. H.

DEAR EDITOR:

With a well-directed gaze at the newsstand I took in the fact that *PLANET* was out. I, of course, knew that there would be a horrible BEM cover but. . .

Who is Parkhurst? While cooked lobsters walk up, a ballet dancer stands on her toes. At the same time the hero shoots a feeble burst. He has the skin that is so baby-white. But . . . that isn't all; there was no Ringer cartoon! Horrible!

You notice that I'm cutting comments short to fit into a mere 2 pages. Few comments will be needed as they . . . fitting into your policy . . . were all blood and thunder . . . with a few exceptions.

Mr. Meek Plays Polo is an excellent story even though I realize others will not like it. Lets have many more of the series, please.

Dr. Universe was good because it had STF and STF if you see what I mean.

The Eyes of Thar was fantasy of the worst type. H. Kutup is becoming a hack mainly because he turns out too many words too fast. A fantasy novel requires a plot with people sliding from one Universe to another. With incredible monsters jumping around and the archaic idea of centuries to one person equaling a few minutes to another; all show that if something sounds fishy they have merely to call it a part of the story. STF on the other hand requires delicate handling to assure thorough science throughout.

THE FEATURE FLASH was excellent.

Gez Whiz Wilbur! I have intentionally cut down on this letter so it will fit in and when you cut down I'll be lucky to have a paragraph. Hmhmhmhm?

As for the Vizigraph I award first place to Chas. McNutt. 2. Milt Lesser. I liked the letter even if you did cut it down until it reaches *reductio ad absurdum*. 3. For that generous soul Jack Potter. Have to drop him a line.

And now for that hypocrite: friend Buchanan. As I understand it we collect, read, write and comment on STF because it is our hobby. Not only that, but we are friendly little chums and we like some of the fan letters and we allow some to "gain notoriety." Further more, the editors wishing to sell their mags allow us to get originals by sending in letters that other fans will like. If any of these things in any way harm E. F. I would like to know how. This imitation of a Primate tells us how egotistical we are. Then in trivial remarks he got across the idea of how he had once edited a magazine. Not a dinky little outfit like *PLANET* you understand, but a great big one.

Think of it, us badboys writing letters to *PLANET* because of our egos. Wonder why he stooped so low as to write this mag and what could he hope to accomplish by it.

May I suggest you withdraw your bulbous, crimson, proboscis from the affairs of fandom and unfairly bludgeon some other hobby like stamp collecting? If you don't like it come over and spank my hands.

Sincerely,

BENSON PERRY,
"Sage of STF."

THE VANISHING MALE!

75 Collins Street,
Danvers, Mass.

DEAR EDITOR:

Although I have been reading Science Fiction magazines all these years, eight in all, it is seldom that I write to one of them. However, "Vizigraph" in the Summer Issue was so interesting and filled with so many comments that I felt that I had to write. (We're glad you did, Doris, Mr. Binger and I have felt neglected. Ed.)

The first point which I would like to discuss is the so-called "punning" in the letters. Perhaps I am warped or something, but I like it. I cannot do any myself but I find it refreshing and entertaining to find that in this serious, war-torn world of ours there are still people who are capable of disentangling themselves from the war and being humorous and entertaining.

Besides, don't most of these people make Vizigraph the easiest of all Readers Departments to read? Are they not carrying on intelligent and lucid arguments along with their witticisms? Science could be much more interesting to the average person if it could be presented with as much "readability" and more people would become interested in science and cease being average. Could do a lot for the world, couldn't it?

I am in agreement with most Vizifans regarding the attire of the feminine half of the front cover. Why? . . . well. . .

1. I've seen strapless gowns, but how does she keep the bra on?

2. Do they really make women that way?

3. High heels don't make for efficiency in running, poor girl gets caught, naturally, give her flat heels and she can get loose.

4. Filmy drapes? for what? they hide nothing and hamper her movements.

Also, why are the women nearly always larger than the men? Don't tell me the male is on the way to extinction! I am a feminist but not a Black Widow.

The stories were something to talk about in this issue. I do not claim to be an analyst of these stories, my field is poetry, but this is how they rank with me.

1. *Morgue Ship*. . . Bradbury did it right. Burnett wanted a last trip . . . he got it. . . Obvious that he would, but interestingly worked out? Yes.

2. *One Against the Stars*. . . Poor Joe. But he, too, got what he wanted. Plot fair. The guy was no hero. Or was he? I think one of the fans mentioned that "heros are made through a quirk of circumstance" and he's right, so Joe is a hero? Yep.

3. *Warrior of Two Worlds*. . . Not convincing at all. If he (Barak) had amnesia he got over it quite peculiarly. If he was hypnotized, how could two persons do it? Elonie and Sporr? I thought one hypnotist was necessary. If I am wrong please correct me. (Not us. Ed.)

Also, how did Doriza reach the high position she occupied in the guards if she was a spy and had only been present among the Dondromogonians since the advent of the New Comers? Lots of action and detail though and good enough to make me read it through without stopping.

4. *Minions of the Crystal Sphere*. . . Revolution too easily accomplished and too much improbability. . . You know, I am really sticking my neck out by placing the old timers down in this list. But can I help it if they are slipping? Revolutions don't take place over-night Mr. De-Pina, they take years of planning, many deaths,

much sorrow not just the leadership of any one man. Cooperation and pooling of leadership is necessary.

5. *Mr. Meek—Musketeer*. . . . Huh? It just didn't click. Mr. Meek the destiny man. He shoots (too much Wild West), he makes energy eating robots bigger than dinosaurs jump through hoops (Marco, the Great, step right this way ladies and people) meteors fall all filled with radium at his command. . . . ! ! ! And we thought SUPERMAN had something . . . oh come Ed. . . . you aren't editing a comic book. We don't mind fantasy but don't stretch out imagination too far. After all . . . fifty years old . . . stooped with years of labor over a desk . . . undoubtedly near sighted from close work . . . but he outshoots a dead shot, jumps lightly up on the back of our Prowler, sees the gambler pulling tricks when other men with good eyes are watching, too ! ! ! ? ? Are we credulous! (Ain't we, tho! Ed.)

The best thing in the entire mag this issue was Vizigraph. I live in a particularly isolated district and have little or no contact with people interested in my type of literature (s.f., pocket-books, etc.), so this bit of "intellectual feasting" furnished by Vizigraph is most welcome and appreciated.

I don't know what you have but I like it. Lousy covers, mostly, sometimes a good one creeps out, not too bad stories, I couldn't do an eighth as well and don't mean to try, but THE RINGER FAMILY, VIZIGRAPH and the occasionally really good stories sells me I guess.

Don't let the paper shortage hold up the book if possible . . . make it smaller, give us less reading, anything, but keep it in print.

Am also in favor of the "Off Trail" shorts.

Keep 'em rolling and we'll keep on buying PLANET STORIES and War Bonds.

A constant reader,
(Mrs.) DORIS A. CURRIER.

GOOD OLD DEMON!

DEAR PEACOCK:

133 e. 17th st.,
new york 3, ny

I bought the summer issue of your horrible rag, hoping to find therein a comment or so on my pal Fleming's story. Needless to say, I was grievously disappointed. Incidentally, Willie, with three months between PLANETS, why the hell should there be a two-issue lag in the readers' department? (Blame the readers, they insist on waiting three months to write. Get them in, Vizifans! Ed.)

Anyway, out of sheer rage I read the whole magazine. No mean achievement, either, with DePina and Wellman among those present. And you get the results. Do you glee?

Terror Out of Space—7. La Brackett always tells the same tale, but she tells it exceedingly well.

Morgue Ship—8. All right, so I got the order mixed up, so what? Bradbury is probably a great writer. I bow to him, without even the slightest trace of a sneer. His genius for getting inside the guy he's writing about, and his unique approach to practically everything, make even the commonplace seem fresh and original.

Mr. Meek—Musketeer—6. Nothing sensational about this, but I enjoyed it. It gratifies one of the more basic human urges—the desire to see a little guy kick the big boys around.

One Against the Stars—3. That plot is strictly corny to begin with, and there was no trace of realism in Garson's approach to it. Nobody re-

acted much to anything, from beginning to end. I had the feeling that if Gargantua had suddenly stepped out of a storage tank, those boys would have twitched an eyebrow or two and gone on about their business.

Warrior of Two Worlds—1. If anything I've ever read justifies the name of "hack," this is it. Reading the thing, I could almost feel Wellman's mighty mechanical brain whirring effortlessly along, clicking the planets into place and adding them up like a sum. The style is smooth, like a thick coating of gelatine over the rough, ugly shape of plot and background. In the World of Tomorrow, all Wellmans will be subsidized with liberal grants of hominy and corn-squeezings so that they won't have to write stories.

Minions of the Crystal Sphere—at a rough estimate, about -.5. Oboy. This is the real plum. You must have been saving it. I have read your readers' comments on DePina, and I know I am a voice in the wilderness, but dammit, this stuff is not even good hack, it is only dull. It is incredibly, astoundingly, insufferably bad writing. What passes for a plot in it is an uninspired synthesis of all the uninspired stf. stories ever written. Not a character has more than a semblance of motivation. There are occasional traces of good characterization—Bejamel's voice, for example—but they have nothing to support them. It's like a nose or a set of teeth hanging in mid-air.

My impression is that either out of desperation, or just for laughs, you left this virtually unedited. Aside from the vast amount of repetition, and the quantities of adjectives such as "incredible," "magnificent," "superb," the sentence structure is very odd. With one hand DePina glues together three distinct sentences, and with the other he chops "he said" sentences into quivering halves.

And if a clincher for that argument is needed, there's DePina's curious habit of pretending that his heroines are men. I noticed the same thing in another story of his—in which he imposed the additional strain on his readers' credulity of making the gal a Venusian or something, by the way.

He followed the same routine in each case—introducing the gal as a slender youth (in "a tight-fitting garment," no less!), referring to her as "him" for a while, and then springing the denouement, at which hero and reader presumably are equally surprised, that she's a female—with it's allowable to suppose, all the usual appendages.

Mr. DePina, I can't be more explicit in a family magazine, but if you'll come around any Wednesday after 6:30, I'll try to put you straight on this matter. I have a book, with pictures. You can come too, Wilbur. (Darn you, demon. You and your education! Ed.)

Well, that seems to wind it up. Just to keep things straight, though, PLANET is the only magazine I'd dream of writing a letter to, and as far as I can make out it's the only magazine that publishes any good science-fiction at all. One of your competitors I gave up reading long ago, because it publishes such god-awful tripe, and the other now prints neat little technical problems instead of stories. At 20¢ a throw, I will continue to take pot-luck with you for as long as you want to keep dishing it out.

P. S. to Miss Washburn: 1) The Army turned down Walt Kubilius. Last I heard he was working on a printers' trade journal here in N. Y. 2)

Yours,
DAMON KNIGHT.

COMES THE REVOLUTION!

409 Twelfth Street,
Cloquet, Minnesota.

DEAR PEACOCK:

The long lines of slaves, their tired bodies drooping with fatigue, looked up dully at the red clothed man on the platform. This was a future world, where all beings were slaves, and all leaders led, and they were attending a class in Historical Amusements (B-xx-106735). The guards lashed their tired bodies with whips stronger than the strongest store-string, and they were weighted with manacles heavier than weightiest cork, but they brightened as the man began speaking, in a hypnotic soothing voice:

"In our lecture for today, we have as the subject a magazine used by the Ancients during the period of Hitlerian Horror that swept mankind and almost destroyed it, named *PLANET STORIES*—" Here he flourished from a hiding place behind his back a gory rectangular-shaped magazine, at which a few of the older slaves, and those with weak hearts, keeled over dead. He paused until they were removed, and continued: "As you see, it has a cover by a gentleman named Gross—unfortunately. While this is not representative of his worst work, it is based upon such an eternal and puerile theme that one can only feel that the editors of those days were far on the road toward decadence—a road that has been averted, incidentally, by our great and glorious Benefactor and Giver and All-Mighty, who has placed you in such fortunate positions, beyond all such temptations." He smirked, looked about, and returned to the magazine, "As to the artistic composition itself, it is typical of a decadent civilization—elementary appeal, to hold the masses in check."

"The first story, I must admit, is a strange phenomenon. The illustration for it shows a brazen hussy in scanty undergarments attacking, as was evidently the custom in those times, some men. But the story itself—by one Albert DePina, and called, to its detriment, *Minions of the Silver Sphere*—shows such a logically developed world, with a general adult appeal that is truly amazing, that it must have been inserted in a moment of utter madness, on the otherwise logical editor's part. It suffers from an overwhelming amount of action that means nothing, and fuzzy characterization, but as I said, it is good—"

At this moment, the Temple Guards decided that this guard's blasphemy had proceeded far enough, and destroyed him on the spot with a morotron ray. Another leaped to take his place:

"Our brother had conceded, to his downfall, that the decadent ancients actually had something good—a sorry mistake. I will correct the misconceptions his statements may have engendered by going over the rest of the issue he was describing, and pointing at its folly. The next story is *Terror Out of Space* by Leigh Brackett. One denominator of the feeble minds they had was that the original title, *Dream From Beyond* was changed in favor of this. The story is rather weak, as this Brackett has a readable style, but wastes it on subjects that are extremely hacky and have no body to them." He smirked again. "The decadent, stupid, ancients!"

"*Morque Ship* by one Ray Bradbury, also is rather weak, in that it depends on a weak theme and plot. The second best story in the issue, however. Simak's story is something hacked

out by one of those decadent ancients to make a little money—strangely enough, they used such a barbaric method of trade instead of our highly developed system of Benevolence.

"*Warrior of Two Worlds* by Wellman, suffers from an opposite malady from those of the above two—it has an extremely heavy style and theme that does not interest in the slightest—decadent ancient! The next story, again, is only story, and intended as nothing more. It is evident that the majority of the authors of that decadent age did not realize that 'science-fiction' must be treated entirely different from the usual type of adventure writing that it was derived from." He gloated, "We have proven our superiority by putting everyone in chains and not allowing them to develop anything such as that to waste time, and valuable energy. No!"

"The readers' section is filled with letters from the more youthful of the decadent ancients. One Ray Karden should be allowed fourth place in their poll, as a tribute to the personal humiliation he undergoes in a brave effort to win an original drawing of such decadent artists as they had." He went through the whole *Vizigraph* and made sharp cutting comments on each letter; but the three he seemed to favor in the end, were in order: Lane, Daniel, Baldwin.

As he lifted it up again, to give a brief résumé of his talk, he noticed a sullen shifting in the crowd, and words were coming to him over the sweating, naked bodies—words full of evil portent for he and his kind. "We can't stand this much longer." Down with the masters—making us look at *PLANET*!" "Down." "Revolt! I!"

And suddenly, as if in coherent communication, they rushed up to him and began to revolt—all over the world—on seven galaxies—this was the day. They revolted and overthrew their masters. Hooryay, they said, we have revolted and overthrown our masters!

Finally, that night, as Glunk 1-xx-549-p stood looking out over the bright lights of the city, the city that was free now, Rosita 0-9-cc-9485-y came up to him. He turned to her, and said, in a long slow smile of freedom, "Guess we've got a better world to make, baby!" He kissed her long and hard, their lips pressed tightly together; free men and women now, without shackles! . . .

RAY A. KARDEN.

UGLY HEROES? HUH?

402 Kent Road,
Bala-Cynwyd, Pa.

DEAR EDITOR:

Having drooled with anticipation over the somewhat lurid cover of the Summer *PLANET*, I opened it with trembling fingers and began. *Minions of the Crystal Sphere* was overflowing with gorgeous and good description, but there was something lacking in the way of a plot. Also, why do s.f. heroes have to be so perfect? These strong, handsome, masculine, virile personalities who charge around so persistently in science-fiction tales make me sick. Can't they ever be ugly? The females, too, are always far too breathtakingly lovely. It's not natural.

Terror Out of Space was swell. Leigh Brackett is some writer. Need I say more?

Mr. Meek—Musketeer was refreshing and delightful after the awesome perfection of Vyril Querlan. (I hate him!) The Prowler was rather appealing.

I didn't like *Warrior of Two Worlds* at all. Doubtless there exist people who would like to kick my teeth in for that, but it's true. Wellman is usually good, but this—this!

Nor did I like *One Against the Stars*. But then, a lot anybody cares whether I liked it or not. Oh yes—*Morgue Ship*. I nearly forgot it. It was good, but it depended more upon gory details for success than a good plot. It was neat, if you like that sort of thing, and I did.

Oh, the Vizigraph! If a PLANET should be boring, I can always depend on this for a little amusement. I would be indebted to you if you would grant my humble request and print my letter. I haven't much hope, though. (You owe us a favor now. Write again! Ed.)

One last word of advice: front-cover artists should read what they're illustrating. The cover was beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, but it didn't have much to do with the story. That is, no scene in the story. It was a little saner than most, I will admit.

And so, dear Editor, a letter has been written I will close with compliments by saying that PLANET is a swell mag, and I heartily wish more power to it.

Sincerely yours,

BARBARA JONES.

A WORD TO THE WISE!

306 West 11th St.,
New York 14, N. Y.

FRIEND PEACOCK:

After glancing over the department *The Vizigraph*, I'm reminded of the old saying: 'Tis better to keep silence and be thought a fool than to open your trap and leave no doubt on the matter. Would that a passel of the parties who pen letters to the various and sundry letter-columns in magazines of PLANET's nature could take this to heart.

During the past decade, I've picked up copies of pseudo-scientific and fantastic magazines now and then, and never failed to find letters in the reader's departments from scribes who's sensibilities seemed to be so sadly smitten by comments to the effect that their mouthings were puerile that they outdid themselves in sheer asininity—trying to gainsay it. This time, one Buchanan seems to have been goaded into speaking his mind. I haven't seen the letter in question, but the comments, thereon seem to indicate that he made a few direct hits.

I sympathize with you, Sir Editor. Readers of the *Vizigraph* only have to suffer through a small percentage of the ravings of this thing they call the science fiction fan; you have to read them all, and, since the department is there, must needs publish. Happily there do seem to be a few letters now and then which have items of general interest, but ploughing through the garbage pile for them must be an herculean task.

Enough of this matter. My particular purpose in writing is to express appreciation for the short stories in the Fall Issue. *Men Without a World* and *Doctor Universe* both struck me as being particularly enjoyable. They're both the "formula" type, I suppose, but the writers injected a sense of humor into the proceedings which made them go down exceedingly well. You can't fill the entire book with this sort of tale, I realize, but it's very pleasant to find a couple in one issue—and I, at least, might go so far as to look up future issues of PLANET in hopes of finding more such.

The Eyes of Thar struck me as being the ideal type of fantastic or future-planet story. Atmosphere, a sense of eternity, credible motivation, and withal a suspenseful, well knit yarn.

I shan't comment on the novelets, except to assure you that they were readable. (The *Mr. Meek* story hasn't been read, because it seems to be one of a series and I'll be wanting to obtain the preceding stories first, being a methodical person.)

Oh yes—your notice on page 122 stating what you are trying to do with PLANET was most welcome. Not that it was news to me: I got the idea after reading a few issues of the magazine. But perhaps it will serve as a word to the wise, if the so-called fans have a *modicum* of the intelligence they boast.

Sincerely,

EVERETT C. MARSHALL.

BLOCKBUSTER BROWN!

Colorado Military School,
Denver, Colo.

DEAR EDITOR:

That did it! One can stand only so much. And having a perfectly good magazine ruined by a communication of one self-appointed demi-god in charge of what we other readers should do is the straw that broke this fan's back. By now all sane people have realized that I am describing MR. BUCHANON or as he seemingly prefers to be called LORD BUCHANON.

He calls us opinionated asses! What does he think he is? He calls us egotistical fools, smugly conceited morons, brats, etc.! Maybe we are, but what is he? (Since you would delete any words fit to describe him, Ed., I will leave the answering of the above question to the readers.)

Toys and Algebra, indeed! Did Mr. Buchanan ever even go to a high school? Probably not or he would read his betters' letters in silence.

My only regret is that he lives in Denver also. As I am choosy about my neighbors I shall have to move. Is the housing shortage acute in Brooklyn, Mr. Lesser? You may see me there soon.

In closing I appeal to all *decent* fans. Milt Lesser, Chad Oliver, Paul Carter and all you ladies and gentlemen of SF, let us organize a crusade to eliminate Mr. Buchanan and all similar vermin from THE VIZIGRAPH. Arise Amigos!

Please print this Ed.

Ragingly yours,

S. T. BROWN, 3RD.

AD NAUSEAM!

And so the battle rages—for the last time. No more fights, fellas; let's find something more interesting to talk about than our Mr. Buchanan. We've heard both sides, and the amusement is wearing thin. The argument has boiled down as to who is what age, and that puts us in a spot—for we have young ideas and creaking joints.

Shucks, it's more fun being ourselves, anyway, with a bit of nonsense along the way, and a nasty dig at some defenseless sucker when we get the chance. I haven't had a good laugh in weeks; any of you clever enough to rate a chuckle?

And that's a challenge,
THE EDITOR.

TO BE CONTINUED!

140 92 Burden Crescent
Jamaica 2, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

I note in an indifferent mood of disgust that Chapter Nineteen in that infinite cover serial is now appearing in the current Summer PLANET. Hero and Heroine have simply paused for a change of costume, and a deft altering of facial characteristics via wigs and make-up. Ye Hero, though, seems to have quite an inordinate fondness for that space helmet and ray gun, clutching it greedily despite all. Mebbe he just has delusions of grandeur and actually thinks he's another Buck Rogers? Or mebbe he's just trying to live up to the lurid write-ups in the stories themselves? Mebbe.

Anyway, the fiendish villain seems to be enjoying his disguise as a blue octopus. I cannot help but admire his singleness of purpose; he knows what he wants, and he keeps on trying to get . . . her. I'm a' rootin' for him; it finally looks as though he might get somewhere, after all.

But looking at the cover from an artistic angle—or isn't it possible?—the only compliment that can be paid is a pretty feeble one: the color scheme was nicely done, and pleasing to the eye. To polish off the interior illustrations while I'm at it, Ronald Clyne easily tops the rest of the artists in both ability and performance. More of his spreads would do PLANET no harm, for he has the stuff necessary for top-notch artistry. Gifford's cartoon is enjoyable, too . . . the more one looks at its complexity, the more one sees, and smiles at. Doolin and the rest of the boys are passable—lumping them all together, they seem to have improved collectively. But glaring at their work individually and under a strong light—aaaaahhhhh! And I don't mean, ah!

Fiction more favorable this time. Brackett had tough sledding this trip, weighted down as her tale was with corny, hackneyed blurbs. "Along an aeon-old highroad slithered a devouring horde" . . . gawsh, ain't that sumpin'? Yeh, but what? Or . . . "An eerie tale of a silver land beneath—etc." Gad, what utter nausea! Even the title "Terror Out of Space" will prevent the story from being remembered long as a well-done science-fantasy, luridly hum-drum as those four words are. But Leigh managed to come out on top again, in first place with a nice piece of work. That was fine writing; I marvel at the clear, simple wordage, free of redundancies and hackneyed phraseology, delineating the plot carefully and precisely with a minimum of superfluity. Solidly satisfying.

Mr. Meek—*Musketeer* and *One Against the Stars* are both close enough to tie for second position. Both have their points, and since it is a matter of supreme insignificance, they are left in a dead heat. And the points? Well . . . Simak has created an interesting, whimsical character in Mr. Meek, and put him through his paces rather well . . . Mr. Meek seems also to have been maneuvered into position for a series of adventures . . . I wonder . . . on the other hand, Garson turned out a smoothly flowing, if simple, action piece . . . old stuff, but still likable.

Wellman started out brilliantly with *Warrior of Two Worlds*. There was a very effective atmosphere for the first few paragraphs or so—and then the whole thing petered out into an ordinary bang-bang fantasy. And one with remarkably little believability at that. All stories involve

pretense, but how can I enjoy those such as this one—that are unable even to fool me into pretending?

Minions of the Crystal Sphere. Hmmm, can't anyone ever think up original and simple titles? And can't de Pina think up better plots than the one in this gripe-ing novel? Yes, he *can*—and *has*, on several occasions. Albert, leave us have less gorish blood, and more mature writing. Or just leave us . . .

Bradbury seems also to have slowed down his writing pace. *Morgue Ship* had an unusual idea, a usual write-up, and a skimpy development. Last of all, and that's all for the stories.

Ray Karden gets the nod from my direction for first place in le Vizi, chiefly because he awes my feeble intellect with pretty-sounding phrases of tremendous complexity, and because I like the cut and trim of many of his ideas. Yeh, you too, Laney, for second place, and Daniels for third.

That "off trail" heading for the Brackettale is quite attractive. What about heading all yarns thusly: placing each illustration on a book-jacket preceding each tale. Wouldn't require any more space. And, after all, what is space to a PLANET that has all the Universe to roam in?

Sincerely,
BILL STOY.

GAW! I TRAPPED AGAIN!

c/o Marshall,
306 West 11th St.,
New York 14, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Gaw. Trapped again. After two years of freedom. Two whole years without science fiction. I read Western stories. I read Detective stories. I read Love stories. Into my mirror at night I smiled. I said: Conway, now you are a man. No more science fiction. No more bug-eyed monsters. No more space-operas. You have put this stuff behind you.

PLANET STORIES came out. I looked. I picked up copies. I put them down. Conway, I said, remember when you used to read this goo? Remember those silly letters you wrote? Remember the sillier letters you read? Arencha glad that is all over. Yup, I replied to me.

More PLANET STORIES came out. I picked them up. Once I bought one. Conway, I said to me, you're slipping. So I stowed it away. On the shelf. One day a fan came to see me. He thought I was still a goon. I gave him PLANET STORIES. Unread. He drooled. I showed him the door.

Then the Fall 1944 issue of PLANET came out. I looked. I wouldn't open it or pick it up this time. But I did. There was a Western magazine underneath it. So in one hand, I held PLANET. I thought I'd glance at it before putting it down. Looked at the illustrations. Punk. Looked at the cover. Ugh. Looked at the blurbs. Heh heh.

There was a story. *Dr. Universe*. A burlesque. Hah, I said to me. About time I read a good take off on this stuff. So Conway read it. Then I read the Vizigraph. Letters more idiotic than ever.

Something happened. Something went squish in my brain. I'm reading the other stories now. They're worse than ever. I'm writing a letter to the editor now. It's worse than the other jerk-notes in Vizigraph.

Yours,
Gaw.
W. KERMIT CONWAY III.

TENSUN! !!!

5531 Roberts Ave.,
Oakland 2, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

—Attention! I—

I, DICK HETSCHEL, have come to the following very definite and absolutely unalterable conclusion!

All sti fans are morons. In fact, they are all egotistical morons. Worse yet, they are a particularly vile form of egotistical moron. Still worse, they are all little children.

Yes, little children, bless them. A bunch of moronic, ranting, self-praising, egotistical, knowledge-flouting, assishly-opinionated brats.

(Arrrrgh! Phit! Phit!)

They act as self appointed judges and critics of works which they cannot do themselves; they squire their stupid criticism as though the stories and pictures were done specially to please them, as readers, rather than to adhere to definite literary and artistic standards of which only masters in the writing and artistic fields can be the judges. And they don't know how to explain the workings of a cyclotron!

I hate them all, the little louts!

I hope they fall and break their snouts!

When "Pops" Buchanon honored us with his first hiccup, I felt inclined to agree with him on many of his points. His second letter, though, gave me a thorough disgust for the gentleman.

I don't think much of the HG's attempted vindication of himself and fellow readers, but Mr. B was certainly not justified in his rather violent attack upon him. Publicly telling a person that you disagree with him, consider his opinions stupid or even consider him a cad may not be so bad, but E.F.B. went considerably further.

And why? If Mr. B had a reason for all this it wouldn't have been so bad. Any real reason (other than egotism or something on that order) was certainly well hidden. So far as I could gather, Mr. B considers the average reader of PLANET to be a child. That would make PLANET a children's mag, wouldn't it? And a child's mag would publish childish letters, wouldn't it? So why is he sticking his well-chosen adjectives in?

The great big, egotistical, first person singular just happens to get a kick out of the letters published, even if a few are a trifle nauseating due to the writer's youth, bad judgment or over-anxiety for an original.

I also get a kick out of sending in my own letters, even though they too may suffer from the above faults.

I won't squawk about Mr. B's sudden reversal of form in answering the letters against him after stating his intention not to. This was obviously a put up job by the editor to keep the controversy going. Nice strategy, Ed., sending out those letters. (Are you incinerating sumthing, bub? Ed.)

Viz. 1. Pvt. Newstead. 2. Wilms Herbert. 3. Alan Mannion.

Rose Jacobowitz, Kathleen Maunsbach and S. T. Brown also wrote very nice letters. I especially liked Kate's opinion of PLANET "Fundamentally, you have a fine magazine although you are spoiling it with all the trash you are putting into it." How true.

Stories. I didn't get around to reading them yet.

Pics. About the same; still pretty lame. Angels is improving; Doolin not moving. Kiemle quite tame.

Cover. To make sure that this missive's waste basket marked; I'll state that Parkhurst should be hearsed and parked.

In closing I would like to avoid Mr. Buchanon's "Letter writers have your fun with me, vent your spleen, build up your egos—but admit that the foregoing is true," attitude. Instead I would like to admit that Mr. B may very easily be 100% right so far as I know. I have been wrong many times in the past and expect to be wrong many times in the future. I see no reason why I cannot be wrong in the present. The opinions I have expressed, though, are sincere and will remain as they are until I receive evidence to the contrary. (Come to think of it, this is a rather silly debate isn't it?)

One of the main reasons I'm writing this letter is to head off my first disgusting missive just in case you're thinking of printing it. Awful, wasn't it! After I mail this one, I'll most likely realize that it's just as bad or worse. Oh, well!

By the way, I've got a hot tip that there's going to be a rush on rejection slips soon. Better stock up! And, of course, there's the waste basket. (Mercy! Mercy!)

Sincerely,

DICK HETSCHEL.

ANOTHER NEWCOMER!

DEAR EDITOR:

6430 Kenwood Ave.,
Chicago, Illinois.

This is the first time I have ever written to your magazine, although I have been reading every one I could get my hands on for several years. The only reason I considered writing this was because the cover on the Summer Issue is one of the worst I have ever seen on any magazine. If that picture was meant to illustrate *Terror Out of Space*, I think it is about time for your artists to start reading the stories they illustrate. In the first place where in *Terror Out of Space* is there any girl running down the road to the city with Lundy or anybody else. Gross couldn't have put less clothes on the girl and still had her decent, and to top it off if you insist on having screaming half nude girls on the cover, please get some artist who will put more fat on the girls, especially this girl. With her skinny hand on PLANET and her ribs showing she looks like a fugitive from a 3-week starvation diet. Also your artists can't seem to get together with the author or themselves to decide what the kelp beasts will look like. Gross has the beast blue on the cover while the story decidedly states they were colored a deep red-brown, like dried blood. Although Clyde seems to have gotten the shape of them to coincide with the story, Gross certainly hasn't come near it.

The story that rated first with me was *Warriors of Two Worlds*, being one of the best stories I have read in a long time. Too bad there are not more men like Barak. Illustration by Rubimor was good, too.

Second best was *Minions of the Crystal Sphere*. Interesting, but took too much paper before you came to that part.

One Against the Stars was third, although I don't like such a gruesome ending.

Mr. Meek—Musketeer was fourth. Let's have more of Mr. Meek.

Morgue Ship was last. I didn't like this story very much, not enough action.

All in all, and even with that cover, I think your mag should average excellent this issue.

Sincerely yours,

EILEEN RUBLE.

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